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The Qur'anic Text and the Limits of Interpretation and Hermeneutics in the Light of Text Linguistics and Communication Theory

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Abstract:

Interest in religious texts has clearly emerged in the writings of both ancient and modern scholars, as they have sought to understand the secrets of their structures, before which all those endowed with the means of eloquence and capable of attaining the purposes of rhetoric and discourse have fallen short. In terms of both its structure and meaning, the Qur'anic text is one of these religious texts that has received considerable attention through reading and understanding, with the aim of eliciting and drawing inspiration from the meanings contained therein. Consequently, interpretations have multiplied, which has prompted many researchers and thinkers to apply contemporary approaches—stemming from linguistics—to the Qur'anic text, such as phenomenological theory, anthropological theory, hermeneutic theory, semiotic theory, deconstructive theory, and communication theory, in order to investigate its interpretation and the limits of its hermeneutics. This is what this research paper seeks to examine in order to determine the effectiveness of these theories in interpreting the Holy Qur'an, particularly in those aspects that are open to interpretation from the perspective of these thinkers.

Keywords: Qur'anic text; reading and understanding the Qur'anic text; limits of hermeneutics and interpretation; text linguistics; communication theory.

1. Introduction

Interest in the study of language (*lissan/tongue*) developed gradually throughout history across various approaches. These approaches did not study language for its own sake but rather as a medium through which knowledge was conveyed. This continued until a scientific break with earlier trajectories of linguistic research occurred with the emergence of a new scientific approach based on the concept of the system, introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure: linguistics, which was concerned with the study of language and the laws governing it. Building on this approach, which views language (*lissan/tongue*) as a system of signs, numerous schools and theories emerged. They initially



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examined sentences and speech and subsequently texts and discourse in order to investigate their structure, form, system, governing laws, functions, reading, and interpretation.

Saussurean linguistics constituted the starting point for scientific research into the linguistic phenomenon. Drawing upon it, researchers developed numerous theories and approaches, including semiotics, pragmatics, deconstruction, discourse linguistics, and text linguistics. All these disciplines devoted themselves to the study of human knowledge productions in the diversity of their signs, with each discipline adopting its own methodology for the analysis, reading, and interpretation of texts.

Text linguistics is considered one of the most important linguistic disciplines concerned with the study of the text, investigating its cohesion, coherence, and structure in order to enable its reading and the understanding of its intentionality. This is embodied in textual structure and functional structure. Alongside structuralist studies and reading theory, diverse views emerged among Western researchers regarding the reading and interpretation of texts; at a later stage, these approaches were transferred to Arab scholarship. Communication theory was subsequently borrowed from communication studies and applied to the human message (speech), after its model and functions had been modified by the linguist Roman Jakobson. Its completed model was then applied to literary texts and discourse. Consequently, the literary work became open to reading and interpretation and to a plurality of readings.

With the diversity of these theories and their approaches to reading the text—despite all of them being rooted in linguistics—the text and discourse came to have coherent methodologies for their study and analysis in all their articulations. This includes the study of their signs as an internal structure from the perspective of Text Linguistics, as well as the study of their reading and the possibility of their interpretations through the relationship established between the author and the recipient, from the perspective of structuralist theory and reception theory.

Despite its sacredness and specificity, the Qur'anic Text is a divine method addressed to humankind and a complete and coherent text, both verbally and semantically, in its structure and functions. Therefore, no human-made methodology can definitively describe its structure or determine its function. Neither Text Linguistics can fully fathom the depths of this divine composition, nor can communication theory conclusively determine a specific interpretation of a particular verse except within the limits of *ijtihad* (independent scholarly reasoning). This applies to those aspects that are open to possibility and interpretation. As for those aspects containing definitive texts, expressed through explicit verses and through the exegesis of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, there can be no dispute concerning them.

In light of the foregoing, and since the corpus of this study is the Qur'anic Text within the framework of approaches concerned with its exegesis and interpretation, our research problem lies in investigating the effectiveness of these theories in interpreting the Holy Qur'an, from the perspective of the views of exegetes and thinkers, with regard to those aspects that are open to interpretation. Accordingly, the following question, or questions, may be raised:

What is the significance of these theories—particularly Text Linguistics—and what contributions have they made to the study of texts? How has the Qur'anic Text been studied from the perspective of these theories? What are the limits of exegesis and interpretation in the Holy Qur'an?

2. The Text and Contemporary Theories

2.1. The Concept of the Text According to Researchers:

Definitions and conceptions of the text have varied among researchers according to the theoretical perspectives through which they study it. They have investigated its construction, the laws governing it, and the relationship between its author and its recipient within the communicative process. This is explained by Abd al-Salam al-Masdi, who states: "The text is both a structure and an instrument, and this implies that the recipient experiences evolving states in relation to the text. The text has one status when encountered for the first time, another when revisited, a third when summarized, and a fourth when discussed; each time, it is as though it has become a new text."¹ Thus, this researcher conceptualized the text from the perspective of reading and reception theory: with every reading, a new interpretation emerges, and with the multiplicity of readings comes a multiplicity of interpretations.

Emphasizing the dynamic nature of the text and taking this conception to its furthest extent, Abdullah al-Ghadhami explains that "the text is a whole in a gradual movement because it is a structural text, and structure is comprehensive, transformative, and self-regulating. The text moves internally through a movement full of vitality in order to form an existential structure through which it acquires an identity that distinguishes it. Once it becomes distinct, it moves, breaking the boundaries of texts in order to enter, together with others, into a context within which it moves as planets move within their galaxies."²

The text cannot be equated with the sentence at the semantic level, even though it may resemble it at the structural level, since both are formed from the same language. However, they differ in terms of movement and vitality, in the changing nature of their events, and in the multiplicity of their meanings with every intellectual engagement with the deep structure. Moreover, the text does not emerge from nothingness; every text is an intertextual product of preceding texts. The formation and construction of a text, therefore, do not depend solely on the writer's talent; they also involve the application of the writer's thought to previous experience.

For modern criticism, the concept of the text has constituted a complex problem and a source of fruitful debate concerning concepts, ideas, and critical approaches. Closely related to this concept, another term is found in critical research that resembles it in both form and meaning: textual cohesion. It "aims at a broader objective, namely, employing grammatical mechanisms to link the parts of the text and, consequently, to understand meaning through a coherent perspective whose analysis is not confined to the sentence."³ Thus, in the construction of the text, grammar is added to

¹ Abd al-Salam al-Masdi, *The Issue of Structuralism: A Study and Models*. Dar al-Janub for Publishing, Tunis, 1995, p. 51.

² Abdullah al-Ghadhami, *Sin and Thinking: From Structuralism to Deconstruction*. Literary and Cultural Club, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1st ed., 1985, p. 90.

³ Imran Rashid, *Mechanisms of Textual Cohesion*, p. 2.

the lexical language chosen by the writer, functioning to organize its structure and convey the intended meaning and significance.

2.2. The Distinctive Status of the Qur'an in Relation to Other Texts

If we turn to the Qur'anic Text in order to approach and understand its miraculous system and attempt to examine it, we find that early scholars devoted considerable attention to it and studied it extensively. Among them was Al-Baqillani, who recognized that the Qur'an constitutes a linguistic system without precedent, stating that it "through the diversity of its manifestations and the variation of its modes, departs from the familiar system of all their speech and differs from the customary arrangement of their discourse. It possesses a style peculiar to itself and is distinguished, in its modes of expression, from the customary styles of speech."¹

He further stated: "When one contemplates it, its departure from the categories of their speech and the styles of their discourse becomes evident; it is beyond what is customary and is therefore miraculous. This characteristic belongs to the Qur'an as a whole and constitutes a distinction present throughout it."²

Al-Baqillani thus recognized the relationship between the written text and spoken discourse, represented in their common linguistic unity and their shared designation at the verbal level, while distinguishing between them in the process of realization. This is consistent with what modern linguistics later established in Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between language and speech, and Noam Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. Accordingly, some critics have considered the Qur'anic Text to possess all the characteristics of a text, which has led some to restrict the designation *text* exclusively to the text of the Holy Qur'an.

As for M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, they defined the text on the basis that it is "a linguistic unit in use and not a grammatical unit such as a sentence. It may be a word, a sentence, or a literary work; more profoundly, the text is a semantic unit—it is a unit of meaning rather than a unit of form."³ At this stage, and with these two researchers, the concept of the text acquired a new meaning that distinguished it from previous conceptions, which had focused on its form; attention thus shifted towards semantics and meaning.

2.3. The Concept of the Text and the Status of Its Author in Modern Theoretical Studies

A. The Text in General: Researchers have closely associated the text with Text Linguistics because of the mechanisms this discipline provides for probing the depths of the text. Mohamed Khattabi maintains that "the concept of the text derives from two perspectives: first, the perspective of general linguistics; and second, the perspective of discourse linguistics. Within this framework, it is characterized, on the one hand, by textuality and, on the other, by cohesion, coherence, and

¹ Abu Bakr al-Baqillani, *The Inimitability of the Qur'an*, edited by al-Sayyid Ahmad Saqr. Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, 3rd ed., 1971, p. 35.

² Abu Bakr al-Baqillani, *The Inimitability of the Qur'an*, p. 5.

³ M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 1976, adapted.

macrostructures as manifestations of the semantic level of discourse. The pragmatic level, meanwhile, encompasses context, speech acts, discourse pragmatics, and macro-speech acts.”¹

Roland Barthes considers that “the text is not a line of words producing a single meaning or a theological meaning ... but rather a multidimensional space in which various writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.”² Here, Roland Barthes denies the author's ownership of the literary text. The text does not contain within itself a single meaning; rather, it consists of several layers, none of which is either the first or the last. From this perspective, the text is open to multiple readings: “This would not be possible were it not a space in which other writings blend and different forms of culture accumulate, because the writer can do nothing but imitate a movement that always precedes him, without that movement itself being original.”³

Thus, every text is preceded by another text and does not emerge from nothingness. For Roland Barthes, the text does not yield a single interpretation; rather, it is open to multiple readings, with each reading revealing another interpretation.

This openness is the mechanism through which the text achieves continuity, transcending both a single meaning and the moment in which it was written. Roland Barthes considers the enduring text to be one that presents the recipient with multiple meanings each time it is reread. The reader establishes an open dialogue with the text and produces its meaning from the standpoint of his or her cognitive horizon. Roland Barthes thus argued that the text does not possess a single fixed interpretation and that the reader is the producer of meaning.

B. The Qur’anic Text and Modern Theories: If we attempt to read the Qur’anic Text through the concepts of these theories, their application proves untenable in many respects. The Qur’anic Text transcends the moment in which it was revealed and is valid for every time and place. Nevertheless, many of its verses have specific occasions of revelation and a clear, definitive exegesis that does not admit interpretation. Likewise, the claim that the text possesses no meaning and that the reader is the producer of meaning cannot be applied to the Holy Qur’an. Roland Barthes went even further by proclaiming the “death of the author” in 1968. Thus, many of the concepts advanced by these theories are unsuitable for application to the Qur’anic Text.

The first and most serious issue raised by the concept of the “death of the author” concerns the doctrinal dimension, which constitutes the foundation of the Islamic faith. The Qur’anic Text cannot be separated from its Speaker (Allah, the Almighty), because isolating the Speaker results in isolating the addressee (the recipient) from his Lord and severing the relationship between him and his Creator. The recipient's relationship would consequently become confined solely to the linguistic dimension of the Qur’anic Text. The Qur’anic Text itself declares its connection to its Speaker in the words of the Almighty: “Alif, Lam, Ra. [This is] a Book whose verses have been perfected and then

¹ Muhammad al-Shawsh, *Text Linguistics: An Introduction to the Coherence of Discourse*. Arab Cultural Center, 1st ed., 1991, p. 13.

² Sa'id Hasan Buhairi, *Text Linguistics*. Egyptian International Publishing Company – Longman, Cairo, Egypt, 1st ed., p. 139.

³ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Munther Ayashi. Center for Cultural Development, Aleppo, Syria, 1st ed., p. 80

explained in detail from One Who is All-Wise, All-Aware”.¹ The meaning of the verse is clear: the Qur’an is from Allah alone and is not merely the intersection and intertextuality of texts, as structuralist theory maintains. Within this theory, the “death of the author” means that the author is no longer considered the creator of the text or the sole voice that confers its characteristics upon it. The author no longer controls the reader or monopolizes meaning; consequently, the author’s intention is eliminated, and language itself becomes that which speaks.

With regard to the Qur’anic Text, its Speaker is present throughout all its parts through various names and through the first-person pronoun. The Addresser (Allah, the Exalted) is the One who speaks in the Qur’anic Text—not in the manner in which literary writers compose, but through His miraculous mode, in which human beings have neither role nor contribution. Studies on the Qur’an’s inimitability have demonstrated that the Qur’anic Text is distinct from and beyond all forms of literary creativity, while reality has demonstrated humanity’s inability to produce anything comparable to it. If the “death of the author” is merely a procedure that enables the critic to achieve a particular objective, then such a procedure is not valid in the field of Qur’anic studies.

3. Text Linguistics and Innovation in Text Analysis

3.1. The Development of Text Linguistics and Its Foundations:

Text Linguistics is a field of knowledge that gradually emerged during the second half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s as an alternative response to earlier approaches, which considered the sentence to be the primary object of linguistic study. It focused on the study of the text as the largest linguistic unit, examining several aspects, most notably linking and cohesion, reference, textual context, and the role of participants in the text (the sender and the recipient). Accordingly, according to Van Dijk, the text analyst must “confine his research to the structures and formulation of texts while taking into account the general communicative, social, and psychological relations.”²

This means that linguistics, as a new science and system, incorporated rules that had not previously existed, and researchers benefited from these rules in analyzing texts and investigating their meanings, considering the text to be the highest comprehensive structural unit of analysis. Among the objectives of Text Linguistics in the study of texts are the description, analysis, and linguistic study of textual structures, as well as the analysis of the various manifestations of textual communication. Text Linguistics enables us to reread certain linguistic concepts through the mechanisms of cohesion and coherence, thereby producing a complete organic unity.

3.2. Contributions to the Study of Texts

Given the breadth of the concepts and analytical principles of Text Linguistics, it went through three stages before reaching maturity and addressing the shortcomings of general linguistics. It studied the text from all its dimensions, focusing on its structure and function. It approached texts on the

¹ *The Qur’an*, Hud 11:1.

² Wolfgang Heinemann and Dieter Viehweger, *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, translated by Fahim Shabib al-Ajmi. King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 1998, p. 21.

basis that the grammar of the text encompasses the text itself, its context, circumstances, settings, and meanings that are interrelated both prior and subsequent to it, while taking into consideration the recipient's circumstances, culture, and the numerous factors surrounding the text. Thus, Text Linguistics incorporated elements for constructing new logical, semantic, and syntactic rules.

This is illustrated by the statement of the German linguist Ruck, who writes: "Text linguistics, as the science concerned with the structure of linguistic texts and the way they function in use, has gradually acquired an important position in scientific discussion in recent years. Today, it can no longer be regarded merely as a necessary complement to linguistic descriptions that traditionally stopped at the sentence, considering it the highest limit of analysis. Rather, text linguistics attempts to establish linguistic study on another basis: the text and nothing else. This does not mean, however, that we adopt the common understanding of the term text (a written text that usually takes the form of a printed product); rather, our concept of the text should include all types of communicative acts that use language as their medium."¹

Text Linguistics can be traced to two approaches.² The first proceeds from the premise that sentence grammar is insufficient to describe phenomena that extend beyond the boundaries of the sentence and therefore studies the text as a unit of analysis. The proponents of this approach, including Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, revealed the pressing need for a grammar of the text, identified the aspects that should be taken into consideration in the text, and examined the functions that text grammar can perform.

The second approach examines the text as a whole, taking it as its starting point and studying its structure and constituent parts in terms of both formulation and content. Text Linguistics reached maturity in the study of texts when it became associated with pragmatics. "In 1964, Hartmann presented pioneering ideas concerning the nature of the text and the realization of textuality. Among the most important contributions he made to the study of texts was his focus on the communicative process among the participants in the text: sender-text-recipient, as well as the context in which the text occurs."³

With the beginning of the 1970s came the third stage, one of whose most prominent researchers was Van Dijk. At this stage, Text Linguistics opened up to numerous fields of knowledge, including literary studies. Hence, Text Linguistics became concerned with studying texts from two perspectives: textual structure and textual function. In studying a text, the overall structure is investigated by examining its general meaning through the study of its internal units and by identifying its textuality through cohesion, coherence, intentionality, situationality, and intertextuality. It also examines the text in terms of cohesion and coherence and investigates its function through the relationship between the writer and the recipient.

¹ Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim, *Principles of Linguistics*. Dar al-Qasbah, Algiers, Algeria, 2000, pp. 167–168.

² Muhammad al-Shawsh, *Foundations of Discourse Analysis in Arabic Grammatical Theory: Establishing Text Grammar*, Vol. 1. University of Manouba, Tunis, 2001, pp. 98–99.

³ Wolfgang Heinemann and Dieter Viehweger, *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, translated by Sa'id Hasan Buhairi. Zahraa al-Sharq Library, Cairo, 1st ed., p. 22.

Text Linguistics is concerned with "the study of texts and how they function. This is based on the logical premise that a text is not merely a sequence of sentences, but rather a specific linguistic unit (*une unité linguistique spécifique*) whose essential characteristic is cohesion and interconnectedness."

¹ This discipline has been employed by many scholars working on the Qur'anic Text in an effort to understand it as a linguistic text and to examine its interpretation. Among them is Mohammed Arkoun, who emphasized the linguistic study of the various Surahs of the Holy Qur'an. Likewise, Al-Jabri relied on it in his structuralist approach, proposing a new ordering of the Qur'anic Surahs according to the occasions of revelation and seeking to understand the Qur'an in a contemporary manner, both for itself and for us, by viewing it as a linguistic whole whose meaning is understood through the coherence between its contents and the events or circumstances in which it was revealed.

4. The Qur'anic Text between Reading and Understanding

4.1. The Relationship between Reading and Understanding

The relationship between the Qur'anic Text and reading is a close one, as reading constitutes one of the foundations upon which it was established. One of its derivatives is the verb *iqra'* ("read"), with which the revelation of the Holy Qur'an began, in the words of the Almighty: "Read in the name of your Lord Who created".² It has been one of the most frequently invoked words among Muslims as a symbol of knowledge and learning, and the very concept of the Qur'an has been associated with it. For those concerned with understanding the Qur'anic Text, the concept of reading has been, and continues to be, the overarching process connected with the various issues relating to the Holy Qur'an, from the very moment of its revelation to the present day.

"Here, it means understanding and drawing inspiration from the meanings contained in the texts." ³ Today, reading has become associated with approaching the text as a diverse semantic field containing multiple meanings. It is not limited to pronouncing the text, but rather involves eliciting its meanings. It is "a linguistic activity that generates variation and produces difference." ⁴ This leads us to conclude that there is no single reading of a given text; readings vary according to readers and are therefore connected with interpretation, since every reading has its own interpretation. Had the Qur'anic Text possessed a single, universally agreed-upon meaning and interpretation, exegetes and schools of thought would not have differed concerning it. This applies to the aspects of the Qur'anic Text that are open to interpretation.

This reading, which is based on eliciting meanings from texts, is therefore connected with understanding. The meanings of a text cannot be derived except through understanding it and then interpreting it properly. Here, we specifically refer to the Qur'anic Text, whose proper interpretation can only be achieved through knowledge. From a linguistic perspective, the concept of

¹ Muhammad al-Akhdar al-Sabihi, *An Introduction to Text Linguistics and Its Fields of Application*. Manshurat al-Ikhtilaf and Arab Scientific Publishers, 1st ed., 2008, p. 40.

² *The Qur'an*, al-'Alaq 96:1.

³ J Hammadi Hawari et al., *Readings in the Thought and Philosophy of Ali Harb: Criticism, Truth, and Interpretation*. Arab House of Science Publishers, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2010, p. 143.

⁴ Ali Harb, *Critique of Truth*. Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 3rd ed., 2005, p. 5.

understanding “is linked to communication and is determined on the basis of reception. Among the functions performed by interpretation are decoding, explanation, and translation. Among structuralists and anthropologists, the production of understanding was used as a characteristic of the social sciences.”¹

4.2. Reading and Understanding the Qur’anic Text

In order to read and interpret the Qur’anic Text, many contemporary researchers, thinkers, and philosophers have turned to applying contemporary approaches—derived from linguistics—to the reading of the Qur’anic Text and to using them in reading its verses. This has resulted in a renewed view of the Qur’anic Text and in a rejection and revolt against a number of classical conceptions that had defined its meaning. In our view, reading and interpreting the Qur’anic Text through the application of these theories should be confined to what was not explicitly addressed by the Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him), namely, those aspects that are open to interpretation, without separating the Qur’an from its Revealer, Allah, the Almighty.

A. Phenomenological Theory and the Interpretation of the Holy Qur’an: Among the contemporary theories adopted by Arab thinkers in studying the Qur’anic Text is phenomenological theory, which is associated with the philosophy of phenomenology. “This phenomenological approach is based on studying and describing phenomena as objects, as they appear or as consciousness describes them. It seeks to free itself from all preconceived, abstract, fixed, transcendent, or normative ideas, and is based on intuition or psychological experience as a path to knowledge. Such knowledge constitutes an orientation toward, or intentionality directed at, a given object through consciousness. One of the most prominent pioneers of this approach was the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (d. 1938), who associated it with the study of the structure of consciousness and with distinguishing between the transcendental ego existing in the mind and the psychological ego. Within this framework, he established what became known as *epoché*, or the suspension of judgment.”² He also grounded his approach in the concept of intentionality.

Among the most prominent researchers who benefited from this approach in reading the Qur’anic Text was the Egyptian thinker Hassan Hanafi, who drew upon it to develop a new attempt at exegesis: “an attempt to transcend the methods of exegesis known in the classical heritage—theological, philosophical, juridical, and Sufi—and their oscillation between textual, rational, empirical, and affective approaches, followed by an attempt to formulate a new theory of exegesis that encompasses them all. It begins with the experiential reality that presents us with lived experiences, which reason analyses and through which it arrives at meanings that become the meanings of the text, which can be apprehended through intuition directed either directly toward the text or toward immediate reality.”³

¹ Hammadi Hawari, *The Qur’anic Text and Mechanisms of Contemporary Understanding* [Doctoral dissertation in philosophy, Department of Philosophy, University of Oran, Algeria], 2013, p. 24.

² Hawari, *The Qur’anic Text and Mechanisms of Contemporary Understanding*, p. 47.

³ Hassan Hanafi, *Heritage and Renewal: Our Position toward the Classical Heritage*. University Foundation for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, Beirut, Lebanon, 5th ed., 2002, p. 185.

Hassan Hanafi attempted to understand the Qur'anic Text through the phenomenological approach. He regarded the various interpretations produced by scholars of jurisprudence and *uṣul al-fiqh* as reflections of lived experiential realities through which their authors engage with and live alongside the Qur'anic Text. Thus, he studied the interpretations of these scholars rather than the Qur'anic Text itself, and interpreted these interpretations as products of their consciousness and their relationship with the Holy Qur'an, thereby denying them the qualities of scientific validity and objectivity.

B. Anthropological Theory and the Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an: The anthropological approach is considered one of the most important approaches to reading the Qur'anic Text. Many Western and Arab thinkers have called for its use in understanding religious phenomena. Anthropology is characterized by several features that have made it one of the essential approaches to the study of human and social phenomena, including those that assume a religious character. This lies in its holistic view of the human being, whereby it analyses biological, social, and cultural characteristics as integrated and interconnected components of human constitution.

"When anthropology studies the Holy Qur'an, it understands it as a human and cultural phenomenon, not in its essence, but in terms of its relationship to human culture and its problems. From an anthropological perspective, although the Holy Qur'an is *tawqifi* (divinely prescribed), it has a cultural frame of reference and cannot be separated from human culture, particularly since it corresponded to the language commonly used in Arab society and was characterized by a polemical nature. It cannot be separated from the beliefs, myths, and religions of societies; rather, it came to engage with and respond to them, and they must therefore be understood in order to understand it." ¹

Anthropology thus constitutes an approach to analyzing and understanding phenomena, and it has been applied by scholars working on Qur'anic discourse, foremost among them Mohammed Arkoun, through his project known as "Applied Islamics." This approach, in turn, seeks to associate the Qur'an with a new conception that moves away from its metaphysical dimension and seeks to treat it as a human and cultural phenomenon. Arkoun thus regarded the Qur'anic Text as a cultural phenomenon rather than as revelation, a divinely revealed system, and legislation sent down by Allah, the Almighty, to His noble Prophet.

C. Hermeneutic Theory and the Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an: One of the most important modern approaches applied by Arab researchers and thinkers to the reading and understanding of the Qur'anic Text is hermeneutic theory (hermeneutics). Emerging from the development of research in the philosophy of language, it represents a pioneering approach to understanding the content of the text. It underpins "the intellectual projects of Mohammed Arkoun, Hassan Hanafi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, each of whom attempts to read the Arab heritage through contemporary perspectives." ²

¹ al-Munsif ibn Abd al-Jalil, "The Anthropological Approach to the Study of the Sources of Early Islamic Thought," *Contemporary Arab Thought*, p. 34.

² Hammadi Hawari, *The Qur'anic Text and Mechanisms of Contemporary Understanding* [Doctoral dissertation in philosophy, Department of Philosophy, University of Oran, Algeria], 2013, p. 50.

Hermeneutics developed considerably in the contemporary period to become an approach to reading texts, particularly sacred texts. At its core, it seeks to decipher their meanings and communicate them to human beings. It can be reduced to the simple concept of "the art of understanding and interpreting texts."¹ From an epistemological perspective, it is also considered "the rational alternative to epistemology as the fixed criterion that regulates the distance between the subject and the object. It reformulates the course taken by this distance by returning to the power of understanding rather than to the authority of the object."²

Hermeneutics is therefore one of the most important theories to have focused on the study of texts from the perspective of understanding. Arkoun and Abu Zayd, for example, interpreted and sought to understand the Qur'anic Text by relating it to the historical period in which the Qur'an was revealed—that is, by associating it with a specific period and a specific society.

D. Semiotic Theory and the Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an: Among the most important approaches applied to the reading of the Qur'anic Text is Peircean semiotic theory. Among the thinkers who strongly advocated the necessity of adopting a semiotic reading of Qur'anic discourse is Mohammed Arkoun, who regarded it as one of the most important modern approaches to the Qur'anic Text. Through this approach, the text is liberated from the aura of sacredness attributed to it. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd also drew upon this approach in presenting the Holy Qur'an as a system of signs, whereby the Qur'anic Text transforms the entire world into a set of signs. Thus, both researchers treated the Qur'anic Text as a system of signs detached from its sacredness and miraculous nature.

E. Deconstructive Theory and the Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an: The deconstructive approach likewise occupies a prominent position among Arab thinkers in reading and understanding the Qur'anic Text. Ali Harb considers it "a form of thinking whose proponents and practitioners have benefited from all the intellectual achievements attained in the fields of linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, history, epistemology, psychoanalysis, and other disciplines that have witnessed intellectual breakthroughs or methodological revolutions. ... It is based on moving beyond what is stated and presented toward what is excluded and left unsaid."³

Deconstruction thus developed within a multifaceted philosophical framework and came to function as an integrative critique of the text. Through it, the Qur'anic Text became a domain of the concealed and a semantic space for what is left unsaid. According to Arkoun and Ali Harb, deconstruction is the most appropriate approach for uncovering this concealed dimension and eliciting everything that has been marginalized, excluded, or relegated to the realm of the unthought within Qur'anic discourse. In this sense, deconstruction moves beyond the binary opposition between the apparent and the hidden that has dominated approaches to understanding the Qur'anic Text and instead

¹ Adel Mustafa, *An Introduction to Hermeneutics*. Dar al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2003, p. 18.

² Imara al-Nasir, *Icons: The Rhetoric of Hermeneutics, the Argumentative Model and Its Fallacy*. Simia Association Publications, Sidi Bel Abbes, Algeria, No. 1, 2010, p. 32.

³ Ali Harb, *The Forbidden and the Impossible*. Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 4th ed., 2005, p. 24.

turns toward what has been left unsaid, forgotten, or marginalized within the field of vision ¹ and within the field of the Qur'anic Text.

4.3. The Holy Qur'an as a Phenomenon Rather than Revelation in the View of Arab Researchers

The new conception of Qur'anic revelation has shifted it from one set of conceptual levels to their corresponding alternatives, most importantly: from the unseen to the phenomenal, from transcendence to immanence, from the ahistorical to the historical, and from sacredness to humanization. This shift has taken place within a framework that introduces new concepts, most notably the conception of Qur'anic revelation as a phenomenon and an event. Various pioneers of contemporary Arab thought have referred to the Qur'an as a "phenomenon," among them Malek Bennabi, who used the term "Qur'anic Phenomenon" as the title of one of his most important works. In it, he presented preliminary attempts to relate Qur'anic revelation to objective scientific study, drawing upon a number of contemporary approaches, particularly the social sciences, psychoanalysis, and comparative religion. He thus spoke of "the Qur'anic phenomenon, which places religion in the record of cosmic events alongside the laws of nature."²

He consequently studied the Holy Qur'an as a phenomenon comparable to natural phenomena and treated it as amenable to observation and induction, beginning with an examination of prophethood as a phenomenon independent of the human self and open to observation through the testimony of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and the content of his message. He "treated it as a psychological problem on the one hand and a historical one on the other."³ This is because, in his view, prophethood is not an extraordinary event so much as a recurring phenomenon that occurs regularly, like natural phenomena throughout history. This extends between two historical poles: Abraham (peace be upon him) and Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him).

Accordingly, Bennabi brought together historical and psychological data to analyze the phenomenon of Qur'anic revelation by examining the circumstances accompanying the phenomenon of prophethood throughout history. He drew upon Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources and established a number of comparisons among them, analyzing the history of the Prophet's prophethood from the period preceding his mission through the revelation of his message. At the same time, he relied on psychological and sociological data in analyzing the phenomenon.

Likewise, Arkoun insisted on the necessity of proceeding from the concept of the "Qur'anic phenomenon" and using it as an alternative term to the designation Holy Qur'an. He regarded this as a preliminary condition for keeping pace with the scientific and methodological developments of the contemporary era and for applying them to the reading of the Qur'anic Text and subjecting it to empirical scientific study, regardless of its divine origin.

¹ Harb, *The Forbidden and the Impossible*, p. 67.

² Malik ibn Nabi, *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*, translated by Abd al-Sabur Shahin. Dar al-Fikr, Damascus, Syria, n.d., 1986, p. 70.

³ Ibn Nabi, *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*, p. 75.

This approach of classifying the Holy Qur'an by removing it from its context and placing it on an equal footing with any other text strips it of many of its distinctive characteristics and consequently leads to erroneous interpretations or to interpretations whose results lack precision. We consider this one of the errors into which these thinkers fell. Removing the Holy Qur'an from its Revealer, stripping it of its sacredness, and regarding it as a phenomenon rather than revelation ultimately leads to the concept of the "death of the author" in Roland Barthes's structuralist theory—a concept that proved inadequate even in the study of texts authored by human beings. There is, therefore, no basis for comparison. Exalted is the word of Allah, the Almighty, above such a heresy.

4.4. Is the Holy Qur'an a Text or a Discourse?

Discourse "is an intellectual process that takes place through a series of primary, partial, and successive processes ... and, in a particular manner, constitutes an expression of thought and its development through a series of successive words or phrases."¹ Many contemporary Arab philosophers view Qur'anic revelation as discourse. In their reading of the Qur'anic Text, they go beyond considering it a text and instead approach it as discourse, that is, a series of intellectual processes expressed through successive statements. Arkoun, for instance, describes the Qur'anic verses in these terms, treating them merely as linguistic statements. The same position is evident in Abu Zayd, who considers the verses and Surahs merely expressions of Arab culture. Most contemporary researchers describe the Holy Qur'an as discourse in order to make it possible to apply contemporary theories to its understanding and analysis, particularly those belonging to the field of discourse analysis.

Among these philosophers is Arkoun, who, despite his interest in the Holy Qur'an as a text, explicitly states that what concerns him specifically is Qur'anic Discourse, rather than the Qur'anic Text. He states: "I personally prefer to speak of Qur'anic discourse rather than Qur'anic text when I describe the initial stage of utterance or textualization by the Prophet, since the stage of writing (that is, the writing down of Qur'anic discourse) came later under the third Caliph, Uthman (between 645 and 656 CE). There is no doubt that the distinction between the concepts of discourse and text assumes greater importance in light of modern linguistics."²

What concerns Arkoun here is the Qur'anic Discourse that constitutes Qur'anic revelation, and whose linguistic study, in his view, helps uncover the realities of revelation by considering it as a comprehensive phenomenon when approached through what is known as Qur'anic Discourse, of which the Qur'anic Text constitutes only a part in his view. This appears to suggest that there is a distinction between Qur'anic Discourse and the Qur'anic Text, or that what we have before us in the *Muṣḥaf* is incomplete in comparison with Qur'anic Discourse. This is a serious claim, as it implicitly suggests deficiency or alteration in the Holy Qur'an, which Allah has undertaken to preserve.

4.5. Attempts by Some Thinkers to Apply Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'anic Text

¹ André Lalande, *Lalande's Philosophical Dictionary*, translated by Khalil Ahmad Khalil, Vol. 2. Oweidat Publications, Beirut, Lebanon, 2008, p. 287.

² Mohammed Arkoun, *Islamic Thought: Criticism and Ijtihad*, translated by Hashim Saleh. Dar al-Saqi, Beirut, Lebanon, 1998, p. 77.

A. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Reading: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is the proponent of an intellectual project aimed at rereading the religious text through a historical approach, drawing upon hermeneutics (interpretive theory).¹ This reading is characterized, in the author's view, by its problematic nature, terminological ambiguity, and the creation of misleading impressions regarding certain historical matters. He "calls for rereading the Qur'anic Text through a historical approach. He points out that the Qur'an is not a rigid text containing ready-made legal provisions valid for all places and times; rather, it should be viewed as a dynamic discourse related to human needs in specific places and at specific times."²

According to his view, the Qur'an contains both universal values and historical applications of these values. If we wish to understand the wisdom underlying these applications, we must study the historical context. As an example of this position, "Abu Zayd refers to the verse granting women half the inheritance received by men and argues that, when viewed within its historical context, the verse was in fact a major step forward, because before that time women had no rights whatsoever. Therefore, if we apply the underlying objective of this verse in the present day, we would find that it indicates that men and women should be considered completely equal before the law."³

In this regard, he applies the doctrine of historicism, advocated by Alain Touraine, according to which events, concepts, beliefs, religions, and systems of social organization cannot be judged except by relating them to the historical milieu in which they emerged.

For Abu Zayd, the historical approach does not recognize any distinctive level of the religious phenomenon, nor does it acknowledge such a distinction; rather, it treats religion like any ordinary political, social, or economic phenomenon. Historicism, in this sense, consists in viewing cultural texts as cultural products governed by the social, cultural, and political context of the society, according to its historical and geographical circumstances.

It is this perspective that Abu Zayd advocated applying to the Holy Qur'an: "He does not distinguish between the human text and the Qur'anic Text, as they are equal, in his view, with regard to the laws governing their formation, construction, and production of meaning."⁴ He states: "The Qur'anic Text derives its reference from language ... and if we move to culture, we say that this text is a cultural product."⁵

Hence, he gives primacy to language and the cultural context in which the text emerged and assigns them precedence, while relating them to the Revealer of this revelation, Allah, the Almighty, who sent it down to His Noble Prophet, only at a third level. This is confirmed by his statement: "Religious texts are in no way texts detached from the structure of the culture within which they were formed,

¹ See his works: *The Concept of the Text: A Study in the Qur'anic Sciences; The Text, Authority, and Truth; and Critique of Religious Discourse*.

² Amhamad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 74.

³ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 75.

⁴ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 78.

⁵ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Religious Thought between the Will to Know and the Will to Dominate*. Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1995, p. 8.

and the divine source of these texts does not in any way negate the fact that they are linguistic texts, with all that language entails in terms of its connection to historical and social time and place.”¹

Thus, he places language first, followed by the historical framework, and only at a third level attributes the text to Allah, the Almighty.

Abu Zayd also attempted to promote his theory of the historicity of the Qur’anic Text from within the Islamic intellectual heritage by relying on the Mu’tazilite doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’an and calling for the revival and acceptance of this idea. He argues that asserting the historicity of the Qur’anic Text is a consequence of considering divine acts and their effects upon the created and originated world. This is evident in his statement: “Hence, the Qur’an is a historical phenomenon insofar as it is one of the manifestations of divine speech.”²

His argument in this regard, however, constitutes a serious epistemological fallacy. The Mu’tazilites maintained the createdness of the Qur’an as an expression of their insistence on declaring Allah free from all imperfection. They held that saying that the Qur’an was uncreated amounted to attributing pre-eternity to it, which would entail positing multiple eternal entities. They therefore resorted to the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’an in order to affirm the transcendence and sanctity of Allah. At the same time, they attributed the Qur’an to Allah in terms of creation and maintained the sacredness of its verses. Their assertion that the Qur’an is created therefore does not amount to equating the Qur’an with other texts, as Abu Zayd claims.

In summary, Abu Zayd’s approach leads to two serious consequences:

- **First:** stripping the Holy Qur’an of its sacredness and transforming it from a sacred religious text with its distinctive characteristics into a text open to criticism.
- **Second:** completely denying the fixed nature of meaning in the Qur’anic Text and transforming it into a text whose meaning changes according to the reader’s historical circumstances.

From this perspective, Abu Zayd called for subjecting the Holy Qur’an to a theory that denies the Creator and “interprets divine revelation as a mythological environmental product resulting from historical knowledge immersed in myth, namely, the theory of hermeneutics (interpretive theory).”³

As explained earlier, this theory emerged as a means of interpreting sacred texts. The term was initially used within theological studies to refer to a set of rules and criteria that an interpreter should follow in understanding a religious text. The use of the term in this sense can be traced back to 1654, and it has continued to the present day. Its meaning subsequently expanded through modern applications and extended into the field of the human sciences, including literary criticism and folklore.

¹ Abu Zayd, *Religious Thought between the Will to Know and the Will to Dominate*, p. 92.

² Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Religious Thought between the Will to Know and the Will to Dominate*. Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1995, p. 75.

³ Amhamad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur’anic Text*, p. 80.

Abu Zayd called for liberation from the authority of religious texts, including the Qur'an, and stated: "The time has come for revision and transition to a stage of liberation, not merely from the authority of texts but from every authority that obstructs the progress of human beings in our world."¹ Abu Zayd's project, therefore, consists in introducing Marxist conceptions and dialectical materialist interpretations of aspects of life into Qur'anic meaning, thereby making the Qur'an Marxist. In doing so, he changes the fundamental concepts of the Holy Qur'an, eliminates the actual meanings of its Surahs and verses, and obscures the religious truths established by the Qur'an and clarified by the Sunnah. Thus, "the Qur'an comes to say what they say, speak in the way they speak, and express every doctrine and philosophy; that is, it has no fixed meaning. Whoever wishes to make it existentialist may do so; whoever wishes to make it Marxist may do so; and whoever wishes to make it secular may do so. This is the miraculous nature of the Qur'an according to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and those like him: the miraculous nature of the Qur'an, in their view, lies in reading different creeds and systems of law within it."²

Abu Zayd believed that, through this approach, he would be able to strip the Qur'an of its status as divine revelation. He consequently embraced the notion of the death of God, as Nietzsche proclaimed, and the claim that there is no God and that life is matter, as Marx maintained, along with other such absurdities. In this way, he attempted to approach the Qur'an in the same manner as other literary texts, treating its content as mythical and metaphysical. This is what the application of hermeneutics to the Holy Qur'an ultimately leads to: attributing metaphorical meanings to its content that deny the existence of Allah and reject the truths affirmed by the Qur'an. If we seek to identify these readings by their proper term, they amount to a distortion of the Holy Qur'an.

We may therefore conclude from Abu Zayd's reading of the Holy Qur'an through this approach that he attacks the Glorious Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah. This is evident in the following:

- His claim that the Holy Qur'an is not revelation from Allah, his denial of its prior existence in the Preserved Tablet, and his assertion that it is a cultural product; that is, a product of the Arab culture of the environment of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and of his society, with neither revelation nor sacredness. Abu Zayd states: "The claim that the text is a cultural product is, in this case, an obvious proposition that requires no proof. But the claim that the text is a cultural product that represents, in the case of the Qur'an, the stage of formation and completion, after which the text became a (product) of culture ... The difference between the two stages in the history of the text is the difference between deriving from culture and expressing it, and providing culture with something and changing it."³

This statement makes it unequivocally clear that he considers the Qur'an not to be revelation from Allah, the Almighty, but rather a cultural product and an expression of that culture. He also states regarding the Qur'an and the Sunnah: "They are linguistic texts that were formed; by this we mean their concrete existence in reality and culture, regardless of any prior existence for them in divine

¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Shafi'i and the Establishment of the Centrist Ideology*. Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2007, p. 146.

² Amhamad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 83.

³ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *The Concept of the Text: A Study in the Qur'anic Sciences*. Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2005, pp. 23–24.

knowledge or in the Preserved Tablet.”¹ Here, it is evident that he denies the Qur’an any prior existence in the knowledge of Allah, the Exalted, and denies its existence in the Preserved Tablet. This is refuted by the words of Allah, the Almighty: «Rather, it is a Glorious Qur’an, [inscribed] in a Preserved Tablet.»²

This author seeks to achieve a clear objective: liberation from the texts and from the One who revealed these texts; that is, to rid humanity of the authority of Allah, the Almighty, and to call for rebellion against this authority. Accordingly, everything that magnifies the authority of Allah, the Almighty, over human beings and existence becomes an adversary in Abu Zayd’s view. Hence, he adopted an antagonistic position toward Imam al-Shafi’i, “because Imam al-Shafi’i, in his reasoning concerning analogy (*qiyas*) and *istihsan* (juristic preference), refers every issue for which there is no textual evidence to an analogous issue for which textual evidence exists, and he refers legal rulings back to the text of the Qur’an or the Sunnah.”³

In response to these claims made by Abu Zayd and others like him, although we live in an age of scientific development and numerous contemporary scholarly approaches through which these researchers have read texts, we nevertheless find in the studies, works, and interpretations of the early scholars concerning the Qur’an, as well as in their study of the Prophetic Sunnah, a degree of scientific precision and objective scholarship that genuinely exemplifies the very principles advocated by these modern scholars. Yet, they remain far removed from such precision and objectivity.

b) Muhammad Arkoun’s Reading:

Muhammad Arkoun’s methodology consists in reading the Qur’anic text through a critical historical approach, from the perspectives of Nietzsche, Freud, and Karl Marx. He states: “Re-reading the Qur’an through a specialised critical reading, rather than a traditional ideological reading, is the first step that must be taken in order to understand the intellectual and psychological climate of the Arab-Islamic personality. This reading is obliged to take into consideration the entire philosophical and critical trajectory traversed by Western thought, beginning with Nietzsche and ending with Freud, and naturally passing through Karl Marx”.⁴ Through this statement, he seeks to study the Qur’anic texts in relation to their historical circumstances, on the grounds that their contents corresponded to the circumstances and horizons of the Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him) and his first listeners, but no longer correspond to the circumstances and horizons of today’s reader.

Muhammad Arkoun also called for the application of historical criticism to the Qur’anic text, stating: “My work consists in subjecting the Qur’an to the test of comparative historical criticism”⁵. He subscribes to Western historical and deconstructive approaches without taking into consideration the specific contexts surrounding the text. He treats the text as a “historical text” and, consequently, subjects it to critical reading through comparative historical criticism and deconstructive linguistic

¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Shafi’i and the Establishment of the Centrist Ideology*, p. 146.

² *The Qur’an*, al-Buruj 85:21–22.

³ Muhammad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur’anic Text*, p. 85.

⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, *Islamic Left*, pp. 41–42.

⁵ Arkoun, *Islamic Left*, p. 43.

analysis. Through this reading, he seeks to establish a distinction between the Qur'anic text as read at the time of its revelation to the Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him) and the text written between the two covers of the Qur'an. He maintains that the distinction between the Holy Qur'an and the Qur'anic phenomenon "refers to the difference between nourishing the Islamic spirit with the Word of God Almighty and studying the Qur'anic texts in the same way that we study a physical, biological, social, or literary phenomenon. In this way, we can overcome the obstacles that prevent us from understanding the verses of the Qur'an in the contemporary era".¹ Thus, he seeks to study the Qur'anic text as a phenomenon rather than as a sacred text, since, in his view, treating it as sacred constitutes an obstacle. According to him, the Qur'an, through stylistic and rhetorical processes, "confers transcendence upon actual historical events that occurred during the time of the Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him), but which were transformed by the Qur'anic discourse so that they would acquire a universal significance transcending their local specificity and become unrelated to a specific event that occurred in tangible history. Thus, the Qur'an effaces the tangible features and precise historical references of the event through a process of sublimation and elevation, that is, elevating these particular events and imbuing words originally bearing social, political, and legal meanings with a religious and universal spirituality".² Thus, according to his claim, the Qur'an succeeds in effacing all the historical details and minutiae of the event and becomes a universal discourse addressed to humanity in every time and place.

His statement contains a fallacy, because it was neither Muslims nor Orientalists who asserted the non-historicity of Islam; rather, the Qur'an itself explicitly stated and affirmed this. It clearly states that Muhammad is the Messenger of God to all worlds, that he is the Seal of the Prophets and Messengers, and that his message is the final message.

On this basis, Arkoun concludes that these representations of the Qur'an are ideological representations. The sacredness of the Qur'an, in this view, is not intrinsic. Hence, Arkoun aspires to strip revelation of its sacred aura and views the Qur'anic discourse as an actual event, comparable to events in physics and biology. He therefore advocates studying it as a linguistic text without consideration of its divine dimension. To achieve this, Arkoun calls for the use of deconstructive analysis in the study of sacred texts and for reading them as historical texts detached from their source. This corresponds to what is referred to in structuralism and reader-response theory as the death of the author, whereby the Qur'anic text is subjected to reading either as a human text or as a divine text constrained by the limits of history and culture.

This, then, is the concept of the Qur'anic text held by contemporary Arab thinkers and the methods through which they analyse and read it. The question that now arises is: How was the Holy Qur'an read by the early Arab exegetes, including scholars of legal theory and jurists?

5. Contexts of Interpretation and Exegesis in the Holy Qur'an

5.1. The Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an among Early Scholars:

¹ Amhamad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 89.

² Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 90.

One of the most important intellectual contexts in which the Qur'anic and religious text was received was that of the exegetes. From the very first day, they directed their attention to the language of the Holy Qur'an. Gradually, a particular philosophical perspective emerged within a specific intellectual context governed by established principles for receiving the Qur'anic discourse and attempting to interpret it as a religious, divinely revealed, and universal message addressed to humankind for their guidance and for conveying the teachings and rulings of Allah, the Almighty.

The term *ta'wil* (interpretation) has acquired multiple meanings since it first appeared in the religious discourse, in both its Qur'anic and Prophetic forms. In the Holy Qur'an, the term *ta'wil* occurs in several verses, most notably in Surat Al 'Imran. Allah, the Almighty, says: "He is the One who has sent down to you the Book. In it are verses that are precise—they are the foundation of the Book—and others that are ambiguous. As for those whose hearts are deviant, they follow the ambiguous verses, seeking to spread doubt and searching for their interpretation. No one knows its interpretation except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge, who say, "We believe in it; all of it is from our Lord." And none will be mindful of this except people of understanding".¹ This text points to the beginnings of interpretive activity concerning the religious text, particularly with regard to its ambiguous passages. These beginnings must have been associated with groups that attempted to undermine the religious discourse through the interpretation of such verses, whether among the polytheists or the People of the Book. "The reports concerning the reason for the revelation of this verse explicitly refer to the People of the Book. It is narrated from Ibn 'Abbas that it was revealed concerning the Jews who attempted to determine the duration of Islamic rule by calculating the numerical values of the letters of the disconnected letters that occur at the beginnings of some Qur'anic chapters."²

Another narration confirms that the Christians of Najran came to the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and disputed with him concerning Jesus, peace be upon him, saying: "Do you not claim that he is the Word of Allah and a spirit from Him? He said: Yes. They said: That is sufficient for us. Then Allah, the Almighty, revealed: "As for those whose hearts are deviant, they follow the ambiguous verses, seeking to spread doubt",³ and then Allah, the Almighty, revealed: «Indeed, the example of Jesus in the sight of Allah is like that of Adam». ⁴ These two narrations raise more than one proposition concerning interpretation:

First argument: Interpretation was associated with the ambiguous (*mutashabih*) passages of the Qur'an, although there is a difference in the understanding of *mutashabih* in the two narrations. "The first narration indicates that the ambiguous passages refer to the disconnected letters, whereas the second indicates that they are those verses that can be diverted toward a meaning that is deviant from and contrary to the actual value of the text. Nevertheless, this does not prevent both categories from falling under the ambiguous passages insofar as they constitute instances of a single concept. Although this represents one category of the ambiguous passages, other narrations from Ibn 'Abbas indicate that *mutashabih* refers to all the verses in the Qur'anic text that are not related to legislation,

¹ *The Qur'an*, Al 'Imran 3:7.

² Razzaq Abd al-Amir al-Tayyar, "Reading and Interpreting the Religious Text among Qur'anic Exegetes: A Study in Light of Reception Theory," *Journal of the Kufa Studies Center*, no. 47, 2017, p. 173.

³ *The Qur'an*, Al 'Imran 3:7

⁴ *The Qur'an*, Al 'Imran 3:59.

such as abrogated verses and other verses that are believed in but not acted upon.”¹ Thus, the association of interpretation in these verses with the concept of *mutashabih* “means that the concept of interpretation will change vertically and horizontally as the concept of *mutashabih* changes.”²

second argument: The second narrative indicates that, although the two narratives differ in the type of interpretive practice involved—since in the first narrative, interpretation moves beyond the framework of linguistic denotation toward the framework of symbolic meaning, whereas in the second, it relies on a particular linguistic understanding and a linguistic direction of the text’s meaning—they nevertheless agree that interpretive practice consists in directing the text toward a new meaning. This meaning may be false; in such a case, interpretation constitutes a deviation from the text’s true value toward another value that the text does not intend.

5.2. Rules and Principles Governing the Methodology of Qur’anic Exegesis in Reading the Holy Qur’an:

The scriptural texts have received considerable attention and interest, and have been extensively read, first because of their sacred nature, and second because of the attempt to interpret them and derive legal rulings from them. Thus, the issue of reading the Qur’anic text has become a common ground among many systems of knowledge. “In this regard, the contribution of the methodology of *uṣūl al-fiqh* surpassed that of other systems of knowledge, as the scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) attached great importance to accuracy, precision, and methodological rigor in establishing the rules of reading and the principles governing understanding, inference, deduction, and sound reasoning. Scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* identified many semantic problems encountered by the text at the level of exegesis and interpretation”.³ In their studies, they focused on incorporating many topics that belong to the very essence of linguistics, as most of the topics documented in this field were linguistic in nature, because God Almighty addressed the Arabs “in their language according to the meanings they knew”.⁴

Accordingly, this methodology was founded on a set of principles, conditions, and rules, and failure to adhere to them in reading and interpreting the text leads to distorting it away from its true meaning. “These rules were established after examining and inductively studying the patterns of the Arabic language”.⁵ The reliance of scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* on the linguistic aspect in reasoning or deduction led them to incorporate many linguistic topics into their discussions and works on *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Imam Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi revealed the extent of this presence when he stated: “Most of what has been written in the various disciplines of *uṣūl al-fiqh* consists of matters pertaining to the Arabic language”.⁶ As for the reason for their reliance on language, it lies in the fact that reasoning depends upon understanding the scriptural discourse; therefore, knowledge of the language is indispensable for anyone seeking to engage in reasoning or *ijtihād*. They focused their attention on investigating the meanings of words and the relationship that connects words with meanings. Most of the linguistic

¹ Razzaq Abd al-Amir al-Tayyar, *Reading and Interpreting the Religious Text among Qur’anic Exegetes*, p. 174.

² Al-Tayyar, *Reading and Interpreting the Religious Text among Qur’anic Exegetes*, p. 174.

³ Amhamad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur’anic Text*, p. 22.

⁴ Ibn Hazm, *The Precise Judgment in the Principles of Legal Rulings*, Dar Ibn Hazm, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., Vol. 4, 2016, p. 47.

⁵ Amhamad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur’anic Text*, p. 22.

⁶ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur’anic Text*, p. 23.

topics that shaped the discipline of *uṣul al-fiqh* thus turned toward semantic investigation because it is more closely related to understanding discourse. "The scholars of *uṣul al-fiqh* examined words in their relationship to meanings, whether individually or in combination, and they also devoted attention to investigating the general requirements surrounding discourse".¹

Among the most important rules they established is the Arabic nature of the Qur'anic text; this means that the Qur'anic discourse is Arabic in its style, language, structures, and wording. Imam Ibrahim al-Shirazi demonstrated the nature of the logic of the Arabic language in discourse, stating: "As for linguistic convention, most speech is understood through it, because words are known through the conventions of the language, and the discourse of God, Glorified be His Name, and the discourse of His Messenger were conveyed in the language of the Arabs".² Thus, sound reading of the Qur'anic text requires knowledge of the Arabic language, its conventions in discourse, and the ways in which its words signify the meanings intended by the discourse. Conversely, failure to observe this leads to deviation from the true meaning of the text. The second rule is their reliance on the "unity of the issue in inference." This rule is considered one of the most important rules upon which the interpretation of discourse depends. Its general premise is that the religious discourse constitutes a coherent semantic unity in its linguistic and religious meanings; accordingly, all texts and transmitted reports that share the same issue being used for inference or interpretation must be brought together.³ Bringing together and synthesizing all texts that share the same subject is what ensures sound reasoning and proper interpretation. "Another important rule concerns the meaning of discourse, namely, taking the discourse according to its apparent meaning".⁴ This means that the interpreter must adhere to the conventions of the Arabic language and its logic in conveying meaning.

The early exegetes relied extensively on this rule in understanding and interpreting the text, because the apparent meaning, as commonly understood among exegetes, is what the text conveys through its clear linguistic signification. It refers to the meaning that immediately comes to mind through the conventional use of discourse, since adhering to this principle leads to grasping the true meaning of discourse in a scientific and objective manner, بعيدًا عن الذاتية. The danger to a text lies in reading it in a manner alien to its established conventions of expression in another language and among another people, resulting in a reading that wastes its rhetorical qualities, destroys its context, purposes, and meanings, and obscures many of its specific features in the use of language, discourse analysis, and the understanding of the signification of words in accordance with the context in which the discourse occurs. It is therefore erroneous and deceptive, as we have seen in modernist readings that approach the religious text as a prose text whose author has died, as in the structuralist and deconstructive approaches. The latter is based on doubt concerning all systems, conventions, purposes, assumptions, and meanings, and on pursuing meaning indefinitely, thereby expanding the scope of interpretation and naturally leading to innumerable semantic deviations. "Thus, the sanctity of the religious text is violated, as is clearly evident in Muhammad Arkoun's reading. The

¹ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 24.

² Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 27.

³ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 32.

⁴ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 35.

causes of corruption in interpretation, according to the scholars of legal theory, include disregarding the conventional patterns of expressions and their meanings as established in existence".¹

Another rule is consideration of the context of discourse (*the implication of contextual necessity*), whereby it is insufficient for the reader of the text to search for its meaning without taking into account the context in which the text occurs. Thus, departing from a strictly literal tracing of the linguistic field in consideration of the context becomes necessarily binding, so as to avoid misunderstanding the text and distorting its meaning. "An example of this is the saying of God Almighty: «They forgot God, so He forgot them». ² In light of what the Qur'anic text establishes concerning the divine attributes, taking the apparent meaning of this text and applying it literally, while considering the linguistic logic of understanding it and disregarding the religious logic, is impossible. This is because its apparent meaning would entail affirming the attribute of forgetfulness to God, Glorified and Exalted Be He, which contradicts the believer's creed and clearly and explicitly conflicts with the saying of God Almighty: «And your Lord was never forgetful»." ³

Among the other rules is "taking into consideration contextual indicators and the requirements of circumstances. It is necessary to consider the contextual indicators, circumstances, and the reasons for the revelation of the verses", ⁴ as well as the occasions of the Prophetic reports, as evidence of the intended meaning of the texts and their underlying rationale with respect to literal and figurative meaning, expansion and restriction, generality and qualification, and generalization and specification. This contributes to understanding the text and determining the intended meaning of the Word of God Almighty.

Likewise, among the exegetes' approaches to reading the Qur'anic text, we find the jurisprudential approach to reading the Qur'anic text. The jurists dealt with the Qur'anic text in a manner that was almost similar to that of the scholars of legal theory (*uṣul al-fiqh*), although the latter took the lead in establishing solid rules for dealing with the Qur'anic text in order to ensure the conditions of sound reading. "The jurists established a set of principles and regarded them as an essential condition for reading the Qur'anic text. Among the most important of these approaches are interpretation based on transmitted reports and interpreting the Qur'an by means of the Qur'an itself. An example of this is the saying of Allah Almighty: "Master of the Day of Judgment". ⁵ Another verse explained what is meant by the word *judgment*, as in the saying of Allah Almighty: "And what will make you realize what the Day of Judgment is? Again, what will make you realize what the Day of Judgment is? The Day when no soul will have power to do anything for another soul, and the command that Day will belong to Allah". ⁶

They also established another principle, namely, interpreting the Qur'an through the statements of the Companions." ⁷ This was due to their having witnessed the circumstances of revelation and the

¹ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 38.

² *The Qur'an*, al-Tawbah 9:67.

³ *The Qur'an*, Maryam 19:64.

⁴ Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 52.

⁵ *The Qur'an*, al-Fatihah 1:3.

⁶ *The Qur'an*, al-Infitar 82:17-19.

⁷ Amhamad Rahmani, *The Issue of Reading the Qur'anic Text*, p. 39.

contextual indicators, as well as their natural command of the Arabic language, clarity of understanding, sound disposition, and strength of conviction. Ibn Taymiyyah stated: "If you do not find the interpretation in the Qur'an or in the Sunnah, then you should refer in this regard to the statements of the Companions, for they have greater knowledge of this because they witnessed the contextual indicators and circumstances that were particular to them, and because they possessed complete understanding and sound knowledge, especially their scholars and leading figures, such as the four Imams, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the rightly guided scholars, and 'Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud, who said: By Him besides Whom there is no deity, no verse from the Book of Allah was revealed without my knowing where it was revealed and concerning what it was revealed."¹

From this, we find that the approaches of the scholars of legal theory and jurists in reading, interpreting, and construing the Qur'anic text were characterized by precision and rigor, and by the establishment of linguistic, contextual, analogical, and other rules derived from the Arab cultural environment and the Arabic understanding. Consequently, these approaches proved highly effective in interpreting texts.

6. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the foregoing discussion has demonstrated the emergence and diversity of contemporary Western approaches originating in linguistics within Western civilization. Western thinkers and scholars applied these approaches to their own sacred texts, and they were consequently rooted in their civilization and intellectual traditions. In light of cultural interaction, our scholars and intellectuals studied these approaches and applied them to Arabic literary and non-literary texts, including the deconstructive, hermeneutic, semiotic, anthropological, and other approaches. They subsequently applied them to the Qur'anic text. In order to facilitate the application of the principles of these theories, they proceeded to alter the way the Holy Qur'an was viewed. They regarded it as discourse rather than as a text, as Muhammad Arkoun maintained, arguing that the Qur'an should be studied as discourse because the Qur'anic text contained in the copies of the Qur'an—according to his claim—is not the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). In doing so, he fell into the misconception that the Qur'an in our possession is incomplete and distorted. He, along with Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, also regarded the Holy Qur'an as a phenomenon rather than revelation, thereby seeking to strip it of its sacredness. In addition, they considered it a cultural product, separating it from the One who revealed it, Allah Almighty, so that it could be read like any text written by an ordinary author. In doing so, they endorsed the structuralist theory that advocates the death of the author.

This view, which constitutes a mixture of approaches unsuitable for reading the Holy Qur'an, led them to a serious consequence: the distortion of the foundations of Qur'anic revelation. They should instead have subjected these theories to the Qur'anic text, since it is the foundation and the original source; alternatively, they should have modified these theories and corrected their shortcomings by

¹ *Principles of Qur'anic Exegesis*, pp. 95–99.

referring to the Holy Qur'an as the model, or formulated new theories after studying the existing ones.

By contrast, we find that the early scholars and exegetes of the Qur'an formulated an integrated theory derived from the Arabic language and the Holy Qur'an, with precise and genuinely scientific rules and controls. They interpreted the Holy Qur'an in light of this framework.

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