

On Interpreting the Qur'an

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The recent exchange of letters between myself and other readers of the *Daily Times* about the Qur'an's position on blasphemy illustrates the problematic manner in which Muslims interpret the Qur'an. Basically, the controversy revolved around two claims made by a reader: first, that the Qur'an authorizes the death penalty for anyone guilty of blasphemy, and second, that disrespect towards the Prophet constitutes blasphemy. In my response, I pointed out that the verses of the Qur'an this reader quoted in support of his argument do not, in fact, stipulate killing people who have been disrespectful to the Prophet and that the Qur'an uses the term blasphemy only in connection with God and not humans. This exchange was joined by a self-proclaimed "liberal" who quoted a couple of lines from the Qur'an at random as a way to support the first reader's contentions.

What most interested me about this exchange was not just that one cannot tell liberals and conservatives apart on some issues (particularly where it comes to reading violence into the Qur'an) but their method of reading the Qur'an. The liberal contented himself by quoting in a piecemeal and selective manner, while the conservative did not seem to notice that he had ascribed meanings to the Qur'an that aren't there. (In the interest of fairness I should note that this way of reading the Qur'an is the norm.)

I am particularly concerned with the method used to read the Qur'an because what we read it to be saying depends on how we choose to read it (and also on who reads it and in what particular contexts). In fact, since the Qur'an itself specifies certain criteria for how to read it, it is important for interested Muslims to analyze and understand these criteria.

To begin with, the Qur'an asks us to read it as a whole (thus, intratextually). This is clear from the fact that it praises those who say "We believe In the Book; the whole of it Is from our Lord" (3:7; in Yusuf Ali, 1988: 123), while it criticizes "Those who break the Quran into parts. Them, by thy Lord, We shall question, every one, Of what they used to do" (15: 91; in Pickthall, n.d.: 194). Yusuf Ali translates this ayah, (in which God is addressing the Prophet) as follows:

And say: 'I am indeed he
That warneth openly
And without ambiguity,'--
(Of just such wrath)
As We sent down
On those who divided
(Scripture into arbitrary parts),-
(So also on such)
As have made [the] Quran
Into shreds (as they please).
Therefore, by the Lord
We will, of a surety,

Call them to account,
For all their deeds
(15: 89-93; in Ali, 653).

Similarly, referring to the Book God gave to Moses, the Qur'an condemns those who make "it into (Separate) sheets for show, while ye conceal much (Of its contents)" (6:91; in Ali, 314). It also criticizes the Israelites who broke their Covenant with God on account of the fact that "they change the words From their (right) places And forget a good part of the Message that was Sent them" (5:14; in Ali, 245). And, again, they "change the words from their (right) times And places" (5:44; in Ali, 255).

Such ayat suggest that the Qur'an is a textual and hermeneutic unity and that we should not read it in a piecemeal, selective, and decontextualized way since doing so distorts its meanings. So does the failure to distinguish between its foundational and allegorical ayat. Thus, the Qur'an also criticizes those who ignore its "Basic or fundamental" ayat of "established meaning" in order to focus on the "allegorical, [ayat] Seeking discord, and searching For its hidden meanings." Although allegory has a clear didactic function in the Qur'an, it is not meant to obscure its meanings, which the Qur'an says, are clear. In fact, if it is read holistically and intratextually, it is easy to see its internal coherence.

The fact that the Qur'an is clear and consistent does not mean that our own readings of it also are clear or consistent or that all readings are equally legitimate. The Qur'an itself acknowledges this fact when it asks us to read it for its best meanings. Thus, it praises "Those who listen to the Word and follow the best (meaning) in it" (39: 18; in Ali, 1241). Similarly, God tells Moses to "enjoin Thy people to hold fast By the best in the precepts [i.e., the Tablets given to him]" (7: 145; in Ali, 383). This should suggest to clear-headed people that there will always be better and worse readings of the Qur'an, depending on our own understanding of the "best." If a people themselves fall into depravity, it is not possible for them to generate the best meanings, even from Divine Discourse.

Finally, no matter how scrupulous a work of interpretation is, we should not confuse it with the Qur'an. In fact, the Qur'an clearly distinguishes between itself and its exegesis by condemning those "who write The Book with their own hands, And then say: 'This is from God'" (2:79; in Ali, 38). Although this criticism was directed at those Christians and Jews of the Prophet's time who were engaged in forgeries, it also is a warning to us not to confuse Divine Discourse with its interpretations. In this context, the Qur'an is clear that "those who are bent on denying the truth attribute their own lying inventions to God. And most of them never use their reason" (5:105, Asad, 1980: 166). Not only do people fabricate false meanings, but they also project their own base desires into the Qur'an; as one ayah says, "And there are among them illiterates, who know not the Book But (see therein their own) desires, And they do nothing but conjecture" (2:78; Ali, 38).

It is a tragedy for Muslims that we find no problems today with projecting our own ignorance, misogyny, obscurantism, and hatred onto the Qur'an, and thus onto God.