

# Specific Guidelines for the Interpretation of the Qur'an through the Bible

By Frank Hwang Choe<sup>1</sup>

General guidelines for the interpretation of other religions' scriptures through the Bible are already developed. More specific guidelines are necessary for the interpretation of the Qur'an for its unique and specific background for its historical and literary background and for its relationship with other Islamic literature. The following specific guidelines are developed with a brief justification.

1. The text of the Qur'an has the highest authority in Islam. This is what Muslims believe and Islam affirms and what Muhammad had taught. Islam believes that it is the words of God recited by Gabriel to Muhammad and should be treated as such. Therefore, all the other Islamic literature should be interpreted according to the text of the Qur'an instead of trying to interpret the Qur'an according to other Islamic literature.

The chronological review of the Qur'an and the other Islamic literature reveals that the Qur'an was the only document available during the formation of Islam, and supports this guideline. Ibn Ishaq (704 - 767 CE) wrote the first biography of Muhammad, but most of his manuscript was lost. Ibn Hisham (died 833 CE) restored and revised Ibn Ishaq's draft. The earliest biography of Muhammad available to us today is Ibn Hisham's revised draft. Therefore, the earliest written information on the biography of Muhammad was written nearly two hundred years after Muhammad died in 632 CE. Bukhari (died 870 CE) was the one who compiled the most authentic Hadith collection. He collected over 600,000 hadiths but determined that only about 2,600 were valid. Besides Bukhari, several more Hadith collections are available today: Muslim (died 875 CE), Al-Nasa'i (died 915 CE), Ibn Majah (died 886 CE), Bin Hanbal (died 855 CE), and Al-Tirmidhi (died 892 CE). They were all prepared more than 200 years after the death of Muhammad. Some Hadith compilations earlier than Bukhari and Muslim have been found and published, but are not as influential as Bukhari or Muslim.

Traditional Islamic scholars including most Western Islamic scholars use the biography of Muhammad and the stories in the Hadiths for the interpretation of the Qur'an. This might be the correct approach if the biography of Muhammad and the stories in the Hadiths were factual. Some argue that the entire Hadiths available today have too many stories such that Muhammad could not have spoken all of

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<sup>1</sup> President, Christian Outreach Training and Research Institute (COTARI), PhD, Stanford University, 1975.

them even if he did nothing but spoke all these Hadiths through his 22 years of ministry. Furthermore, many Hadith stories are contradictory to each other, and sometimes contradict the teachings of the Qur'an. That is why many recent Islamic scholars do not consider valid all the stories of the Hadiths. Also modern Islamic scholarship demonstrates that *isnads* (Islamic method of quoting all the transmitters of a hadith story) is unreliable. Many of the stories in these medieval Islamic literature were made up to explain the text of the Qur'an or to justify their own actions instead of being factual. In other words, Muslims in the medieval period tried to justify their own belief and actions. This is understandable because all these Islamic literature were written at least two hundred years after the death of Muhammad, and because Muslims desired justification of their religious practices. For this reason, some modern Islamic scholars ignore the Islamic tradition and just use the Qur'an alone in the description of the emergence of Islam and the interpretation of the Qur'an<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, Islam claims that the Qur'an is its highest authority, and no Islamic scholar or no Muslim disagrees with this position. This Islamic claim should be demonstrated by their actions honoring the text of the Qur'an over any other Islamic literature.

The Islamic literature is used in this book only to provide the context for the Qur'anic verses when it is consistent with the Qur'anic text. In particular, *Asbab al Nuzul*<sup>3</sup> is extensively used to provide the background context for the Qur'anic verses whenever appropriate.

2. The Qur'an is considered as a literary work for analysis and interpretation. God used a human language to convey His message, and therefore modern hermeneutical methods are applied for the interpretation of the Qur'an.

For a proper hermeneutical analysis, two main steps should be taken in general. First, we should understand what the text of the Qur'an says. For this purpose, we should know the context for the pericope, and study semantics, grammar, syntax and genre used. This involves understanding such things as philological analysis and "Figure of Speech" among others. Secondly, once the text of the Qur'an is understood, we should consider why the particular verses were revealed for the given circumstances or contexts. This requires a

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<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, Gabriel Said, *The Emergence of Islam*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 85-92. Also Wansbrough, John, *Quranic Studies*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi, *Asbab al-Nuzul*, translated by Mokrane Gezzou, Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008. This provides excellent background contexts for many verses of the Qur'an.

theological consideration to uncover the underlying principle behind the verse. The underlying principle thus discovered can be applied for different situations while the exact contents of a verse may not be applied for all circumstances unless it is proven to be applicable universally. This is because God reveals His messages using a particular language for particular circumstances at hand.

3. In the interpretation of the Qur'an, application of a specific verse for a specific circumstance should be considered separately from the interpretation itself.

Majority of the Hadiths and the biography of Muhammad should be considered to be applications of the Qur'an at the time of Muhammad, and cannot be applied to the situations in the modern world blindly without further evaluations. When the reason or occasion for the revelation of a Qur'anic verse is stated in general terms, thus making it possible to find the underlying principle, then the principle found may be relevant to similar situations in the future. Even some of the Qur'anic verses are applications for specific circumstances as explained below.

The Qur'an allows up to four wives (Q. 4:3) for a believer. This provision was provided at the time, because there were so many widows and orphans due to the high casualty in the Battles of Badr and Uhud. The number of women far exceeded the number of men in Medina at the time. It was a way of providing the means of living for the poor widows and orphans. The underlying principle is to help the poor widows and orphans. This verse should not be applied directly today because the numbers of males and females are about the same in nearly all societies today. The underlying principle to help the poor widows and orphans, however, can be applied even today.

The Qur'an also allows many more than four wives (Q. 33:50) for Muhammad alone, not for other Muslim believers. This is a special application for Muhammad at the time, and is acceptable by the moral standards of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. The role of Muhammad was like the role of King David of Israel. A privileged class or person was allowed additional privileges socially at the time, and having more than four wives was properly accepted for Muhammad as was for King David. No religious leader today could have such a privilege, because such a practice is considered an unacceptable moral behavior today.

In the Bible study, applications are clearly distinguished from interpretations in general. In the *Tafsir* (interpretation) of the Qur'an, however, Islamic scholars have not made clear distinction between interpretations and applications. In this book, clear distinction is made between interpretations and applications.

4. God is omnipotent and omniscient, and many of His traits are different from man. This point is well described throughout the entire Qur'an. For this reason, we should not limit or restrict what He can or cannot do, and what He can be or cannot be. Corollaries to this principle are stated below:

a. God is one being (*ousia*, ουσια), but can have many persons (*hypostaseis*, ὑπόστασεις) in one being unlike man. Man can have only one person (*hypostasis*, ὑπόστασις) in one being (*ousia*, ουσια). Denying this ontological ability of God limits Him, and denies His omnipotence. We should not transfer the limitation of man (one person in one being) to God.

The Qur'an shows that the work of God is done by *Allah* directly, but also through the Holy Spirit, and history shows that His work is also done through the *Ayat* (the Arabic word for verse or sign, representing the Qur'an) that is made up of *Kalima* ("word" in Arabic). In other words, there are three agents or offices that perform the work of God: *Allah*, the Holy Spirit, and the Qur'an. Having such a functional division in the Godhead gives much greater power to God. The Divine word in the Qur'an transforms lives of people just as *Allah* or the Holy Spirit does.

b. God can allow a person to have two natures, divine nature and human nature. For man, one person can have only one nature, human nature. Denying this capability of God limits Him, and denies His omnipotence. We should not transfer the limitation of man (one nature for one person) to God.

The Qur'an clearly teaches that God can allow two natures in one person (Q. 6:9, 19:17). The Qur'an specifically mentions that an angel or the Spirit of God appears in the form of man. If an angel appears in the form of man, the man must have a human nature as well as an angelic nature. If the Spirit of God appears in the form of man, the man must have a human nature as well as a divine nature.

c. This book does not believe in "abrogation by God" of certain Qur'anic verses.

In the Qur'an, the word "abrogate" (*nasakha* in Arabic) is used only once in Q. 2:106, "*We do not abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten except that We bring forth one better than it or similar to it.*" This verse is interpreted as follows: God reveals His message to suit the circumstance at hand, and therefore He could reveal a different message for a new circumstance. Many traditional Islamic scholars believe that God abrogated certain verses of the Qur'an

and the abrogated verses are not valid any more in order to resolve contradictory statements in the Qur'an. They, however, cannot agree regarding which verses were abrogated. Using "abrogation by God" denies omniscience of God. For this reason, some Islamic scholars do not believe that God would abrogate, and this book also does not believe in "abrogation by God," and interprets Q. 2:106 as above: the message of God should be interpreted to suit the context following modern hermeneutical principles.

5. The historical background during the emergence of Islam in Arabian Peninsula should be carefully considered.

The review of historical and social background during the period of Islamic formation indicates a strong interaction with Christianity, including many Christian sects that existed in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabian Peninsula<sup>4</sup>. Some of these Christian sects were considered heretical and contributed to the formation of the Arabian perception of Christianity in the Qur'an. The perception of Christianity that is reflected in the Qur'an is not applicable to Christianity today. In addition, some of the heretical Christian theologies influenced Islamic theology as well. Some of the Christian sects and theologies that influenced the Qur'an and the Islamic theology are listed below:

- a. Jacobites: They belonged to a Christian sect that opposed Nestorians and were called "monophysites." They believed that Jesus had one nature only. The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) supported two natures in one person for Jesus Christ, and is considered as accepted doctrine in Christianity. They were called Jacobites due to the influence of a bishop named Jacob Baradaeus (died 578 CE) in Syria. They were mostly spread in Southern Arabia at the time of Islam's rise, and were linked closely with the Monophysite Ethiopian Church. Islamic theology that Jesus has only one nature (human nature) could have been influenced by monophysitism of Jacobites.
- b. Nestorians: They belonged to a Christian sect that claimed that Jesus had two persons instead of two natures, and the sect was declared heretical in the Council of Ephesus (431 CE), and they were driven out of the Western Church. They preferred to be called the Church of the East, and had spread over the Middle East and as far as to China.
- c. Melkites: They belonged to the Eastern Church centered at Byzantine, and supported the two natures in one person for Jesus which was affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon.

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4 Reynolds, Chapter 7, "The Historical Context of the Qur'an," pp. 153-166.

- d. Collyrians: This Christian cult worshiped Mary as a goddess and taught that the Trinity is comprised of Father God, Mother Mary and Son Jesus. It started from Syria or Asia Minor, and spread to Arabia around 4<sup>th</sup> century. Certain women in Arabia syncretized indigenous beliefs with worship of Mary, according to Epiphanius in his *Panarion* (375 CE). They may be the origin of philomarianites (lovers of Mary) in Catholicism. The Trinity that Christians are alleged to believe in the Qur'an appears to come from this Christian cult, and does not represent the Trinitarian concept of Christianity today.
- e. Pelagianism<sup>5</sup>: This theological concept was developed by Pelagius (354 - 440 CE), and believes that original sin of Adam and Eve did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid. Pelagius was born in Britain, was active in Rome during 383 - 410 CE. Later he moved to Northern Africa and traveled to Jerusalem. Pelagianism was condemned in the Council of Carthage (418 CE). His influence is greatest in Northern Africa and Middle East where he spent the last part of his life. He disappeared after he was barred from Palestine by a synod at Antioch (424 CE) and it is conjectured that he probably died in Egypt. This theological idea was opposed by Augustine of Hippo. Islamic theology that man is born without sin derives from Pelagianism.

6. The Qur'an was written in Arabic for Arabs (Q. 12:2, 26:192-195, 42:7, 43:3, 46:12),<sup>6</sup> and Muhammad was sent to Arabs (Q. 4:79). Scriptures were revealed to Jews and Christians earlier, and finally revealed to Arabs (Q. 6:156-157).

The Arabic word, *al-Nas* (the people, الناس), is used many times in the Qur'an, and refers to Arabs. That is why it has the definite article *al* before *Nas*. The root word for *Nas* is *Anisa* or *Nasa*. Many English versions of the Qur'an use wrong translations of this Arabic word, "people," "humankind," "mankind," or "men," as if there is no definite article. This Arabic word should be translated to "the people," referring to Arabs. This is the only translation consistent with the above quoted Qur'anic verses.

7. The Torah and the Gospel mentioned in the Qur'an are a synecdoche (a

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5 Douglas, J. D. & Earle E. Cairns (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ZondervanPublishingHouse: Grand Rapids, 1978). "Pelagianism" in pp. 760-761.

6 Reynolds, pp. 154-155.

figure of speech that a part represents the whole) for the Old and New Testaments.

A typical example for a synecdoche may be found in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." Here "daily bread" does not mean simply bread, but represents the food we need to sustain our body everyday as well as our daily material needs such as clothing and housing. The Qur'an confirms this figure of speech in Q. 3:3-4a, "He (this refers to God) has sent down upon you (this refers to Muhammad), the book in truth, confirming what was before it. And He revealed the Torah and the Gospel before, as guidance for the people. And He revealed the criterion." The book in truth revealed to Muhammad represents the Qur'an. God also revealed the Torah and the Gospel along with the criterion (*Furqan* in Arabic). *Furqan* represents the rest of the Old and New Testaments. The traditional Islamic interpretation claims that Muslims should believe only the Torah, the Gospel, and the Psalms (*zabur*) of David out of the Bible because they are specifically mentioned in the Qur'an. This traditional Islamic interpretation is rejected, because it is not consistent with the teaching in the rest of the Qur'an that Muslims should believe in "what has been revealed to you, and what was revealed before you ('you' refers to Muhammad)" (Q. 2:4). This expression clearly refers to the Qur'an and the Bible, not just the Torah and the Gospel. Similar expressions are used seven more times in the Qur'an (Q. 2:136, 3:199, 4:60, 4:136, 4:162, 5:59, 29:46). This is made even more clear further in Q. 10:94, "So if you are in doubt, about what We have revealed to you, then ask those who have been reading the Scripture before you ('you' refers to Muhammad)." The "Scripture" in this verse clearly points to the Bible. Both the Bible and the Qur'an make extensive use of many different figures of speech, including synecdoche.

8. A number of the traditional Islamic practices are not consistent with the Qur'an or with rational logics. They are not adopted in the interpretation of the Qur'an through the Bible.
  - a. Sharia Law should not be enforced blindly today.

Many Islamic countries are trying to enforce Sharia Law following the advices of traditional Islamic scholars. Laws and a society are mutually interactive: Changes in a society requires new laws, and enforcement of a new law effect changes in the society. For this reason, laws established in one era cannot be applied to another era without further contextual evaluations. Sharia Law has some good aspects but should be evaluated carefully for the differences between the medieval Arabic society and the modern society. Interpretation and application of a law are not much

- different from those of a scripture, and modern hermeneutical methods may be used for interpretation and application of laws. Sharia Law itself has several different schools and different schools offer different interpretations. Above all, Sharia Law is not consistent with the Qur'anic Law. One example of difference between the Qur'anic Law and Sharia Law can be found regarding the punishment of adulterers or adulteresses: Q. 24:2 requires 100 lashes while Sharia Law requires death by stoning.
- b. Islamic theology should be developed based on the text of the Qur'an as the primary source instead of other external ideas. The external sources may still be used to supplement the Qur'anic text. One such example may be found in the Islamic theology that says that man is born without sin. This theological idea is derived from Pelagianism and traditional Islamic scholars use the Qur'anic verses (Q. 2:37, 7:23) to support this theological concept. The texts of these verses are compared to the traditional Islamic interpretations to show how some traditional Islamic scholars add additional sentences or phrases to justify their own theological position. The text of these Qur'anic verses reads: "Then Adam received words from his Lord, and He turned toward him" (Q. 2:37) and "They (Adam and Eve) said, 'Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers'" (Q. 7:23). The texts of these verses alone do not fully support this Islamic theological concept. Therefore, they insert additional sentences or phrases as follows (shown in *italics* below) in order to match their theological idea: "Then Adam received words *of repentance* from his Lord *and repented*, and He turned toward him *and accepted his repentance and forgave him*" (Q. 2:37) and "They (Adam and Eve) said, 'Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, *and understand what we did wrong and will not do this again in the future*, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers.' *Therefore, God forgave them.*" (Q. 7:23).
- c. Muhammad was a morally upright man according to the standards of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, but the same cannot be claimed for him for all times<sup>7</sup>.

This does not deny that he did many wonderful things for Arabs just as King David did for the nation of Israel. The consequence of this conclusion is that what he did (his biography) and said (the Hadith) are primarily applicable during his time and

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<sup>7</sup> Watt, William Montgomery, *Muhammad at Medina*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1981). Also quoted by Reynolds, p. 79.

- that they should be considered as special applications at his time instead of permanent truth that should be obeyed at all times.
- d. Muslims should not put Muhammad above the Qur'an.

Traditional Islam claims that it does not worship Muhammad but puts him above the Qur'an by their actions, and interprets the Qur'an according to his life and his sayings. This practice is not consistent with the Qur'an, Q. 3:79-80: "It is not for a human prophet that Allah should give him the Scripture and authority and prophethood and then he would say to the people, 'Be servants to me rather than Allah,' but instead, he would say, 'Be pious scholars of the Lord because of what you have taught of the Scripture and because of what you have studied.' Nor could he order you to take the angels and prophets as lords. Would he order you to disbelief after you had been Muslims?" Muslims today clearly show by their actions that they put Muhammad above the Qur'an. A much bigger rally is held when Muhammad is insulted than when the Qur'an is blasphemed. The Blasphemy Law of Pakistan has the following: § 295-B forbids defiling the Quran and the punishment for violation is imprisonment for life, but § 295-C forbids defaming the Islamic prophet Muhammad and the punishment for violation is death with or without a fine. The punishment is much severer for defaming Muhammad than for blaspheming the Qur'an. Islamic practice is not consistent with the Qur'an and the teachings of Muhammad.