

Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-first Century: A Contextualist Approach, by Abdullah Saeed (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), vi+196 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-67750-9, £85.00 (hb)

“Meaning” is attained through context, and not wording.

The “contextual” approach is among the most significant elements to consider when trying to comprehend verses (*āyah*) in Qur'ānic studies. Indeed, the address of the Qur'ān presents the text's first, original, and historical meaning in its context. The descent of the Qur'ān began in 610 AD in Mecca; therefore, we need to consider what the addressees, who witnessed the process of revelation, understood from the Qur'ān if we are to discover its original and historical meaning.

During the last century, according to the common sociological approach to exegesis (*tafsīr*) in the Muslim world, it has been suggested that the Qur'ān should be read as if it were revealed on the day one reads it; accordingly, it became commonplace to understand and interpret the Qur'ān exclusively through the book, namely, the text. This approach brought about several problems, which we can call the “modern reproduction of the Qur'ān.” Abdullah Saeed's *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-first Century: A Contextualist Approach*, may help to resolve this problem.

Saeed's work consists of three chapters. In the first, the author touches upon the background of the contextualist approach. According to hard-textualism, new ideas regarding the interpretation of the Qur'ān are either non-Islamic or even anti-Islamic. For Saeed however, the contextualist approach is very much Islamic, with deep roots in the tradition (p. 4). At this point, he indicates that contextualism dates back to earlier periods and cites examples of reconciliations (*muwāfaqāt*) by 'Umar (p. 26-36). He also notes interpretations of the Qur'ān by female authors as a modern form of contextualism (p. 38-48). In this respect, Muslim scholars, primarily women, offer readings of the Qur'ān in a gender-neutral manner. In doing so, they rely, in part, on the works of a number of Muslim scholars, such as Muḥammad 'Abduh and Fazlur Rahman, who provided a range of tools with which to think about Qur'ānic interpretation today. In turn, these women scholars contributed their

own ideas and made significant contributions to the field. These scholars emphasize that the Qur'ān was revealed in a specific socio-historical context that differs from the context of today. They note that readings of the Qur'ān must be historically contextual, and they recognize that the Qur'ān speaks to all Muslims equally and advocates justice and equality, compassion and fairness, and has promoted many positive changes for women (p. 47).

According to Saeed, two essential keys to the comprehension of divine discourse – namely, the existence of Muḥammad and his political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual context – melt away upon the demise of Muḥammad (p. 14). In his second and – for him – most important chapter, Saeed touches upon key ideas about contextualist interpretation. This chapter addresses issues such as the content of the relationship between revelation and context; the hierarchy of values in the Qur'ān (obligatory, fundamental, protectional, implementational, and instructional values [p. 64]); criteria for the use of ḥadīth in interpretation; and semantic fluidity and ways of ensuring a certain level of consistency in interpretation. In this chapter, the author also discusses the steps of the contextual approach, which can be summarized as follows: (1) Preliminary considerations, comprehension of the subjectivity of the exegete; (2) Beginning with the task of interpretation; (3) Identifying the meaning of the text; (4) Relating the interpretation of the text to the current context (p. 94-107).

For Saeed, context is a comprehensive concept that includes both linguistic and macro context (p. 5). He divides the macro-context into categories. The macro context is the context during the period in which the Qur'ān was revealed. The macro context includes issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, the positions of men and women in society, slaves and slavery, and the status of non-Muslims in Muslim societies (p. 6-7). Such texts are directly related to the context in which the Qur'ān descended (p. 6-7, 58-59). The macro context also signifies conditions during the lifetime of the exegete, as well as social functions and contemporary religious and cultural norms. Pursuant to the contextualist approach, it is appropriate to primarily comprehend and explain the provisions of the Qur'ān on its own historical ground, before interpreting the actual value of these provisions in today's world by leaning on the original, determinate meaning.

In later chapters of his work, Saeed presents, through four problems, examples of the evolution of Qur'ānic interpretation in the classical and modern eras: male custody/men's "authority" over women and equality between the sexes; the crucifixion and death of Jesus; council/*shūrā* and democracy; and usury (*ribā*) and interest. Saeed touches upon various classical and modern interpretations for explaining the problem of the authority of men over women. He adds that today, women receive education and participate in business life; therefore, "If the Qur'ān was revealed in the twenty first century, it would most likely approach this topic in a different way." (p. 125)

In *Reading the Qur'an*, Saeed names authors such as Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud among contextualist thinkers. Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud might be called contextualist; nevertheless, please bear in mind that these authors associate discourses about human rights, democracy, and the equality of men and women directly with the text of the Qur'ān.

As is known, the interpretative method adopted by Fazlur Rahman is defined as "historicism." According to historicism, Qur'ānic revelation should, above all, be evaluated within the context of the historical conditions of its day. For Fazlur Rahman, divine revelation descended within a certain context. Therefore, the revelation (*wahy*) includes elements specific to the era of revelation and to the context of that era's society. Nevertheless, Fazlur Rahman's opinions, articulated through the historicist perspective, on the equality of men and women, usury, and slavery seem problematic with regard to the time of revelation. Indeed, asserting that the Qur'ān's acceptances of gender inequality and/or slavery are temporary, Fazlur Rahman grounds his arguments in acceptances of modern opinions rather than what these verses actually expressed in their time. The same goes for contemporaneous women thinkers such as Amina Wadud. In her interpretation of the term "*wa-ḍribūnna*" in Q 4:34, Amina Wadud takes the term out of its context and opts for an anachronic interpretation. However, such interpretations correspond to what Ömer Özsoy calls the "contemporary reproduction of Qur'ān(s)."¹ For us, it would be a populist, modernist, and apologist view to compel the Qur'ān to express contemporary interpretations in the name of "context."

¹ Özsoy, Ömer, "Çağdaş Kur'an(lar) Üretimi Üzerine," *İslâmiyât* 5, no. 1 (2002), 111.

Then again, in the third chapter, Saeed brings forward the crucifixion and death of Jesus, *shūrā* and democracy, and *ribā* and interest. Under the title of the crucifixion and death of Jesus, he compares relevant verses with various translations and briefly reports how Jesus is perceived among Muslims. Moreover, he explains how the term *shubbīha lahum* was understood in classical exegeses and gives modern interpretations of this expression. As for *shūrā* and democracy, Saeed discusses interpretations of the classical and contemporary eras. He indicates that in modern times, the concept of *shūrā* was adopted as something prone to democracy (p. 157). He also treats verses and exegeses about *ribā* and interest and analyzes the prohibition of *ribā* in the Qur'ān under titles such as moral context, rationality, and legal and illegal usury (p. 160-173).

According to Saeed, many chapters of the Qur'ān do not require contextualist readings because they are related to different contexts. Consequently, only certain texts require contextualist readings, and each verse does not require a separate context. Stories of Adam and Moses-Pharaoh are examples of this (p. 6). However, once they are read in consideration of their historical contexts, these stories include messages pursuant to compliance between biography-descent (*siyar-nuzūl*). In our opinion, Qur'ānic stories should not be interpreted merely on the axis of wording-meaning, indifferent to the historical experience of Muḥammad. If we are to explain the story of Moses and Pharaoh via context, the battle of Moses against Pharaoh and his men seems to correspond to the struggle of Muḥammad against the polytheists of Mecca. Indeed, the style of narration of the stories in the Qur'ān is quite compliant with the actual situation during the time of descent.

At this point, it seems that biographical information and the times of the descent of verses should have been stressed more in the book. Indeed, the importance of biographical information is inevitable if we are to comprehend the context of the Qur'ān. The process of the descent of the Qur'ān is not independent from the life of Muḥammad; on the contrary, they are nested within one another. Historical, social, and cultural grounds and life experience during the period of descent should definitely be taken into account for accurate comprehension and interpretation of the Qur'ān. In this regard, in Turkey there are also some studies that take the context of revelation into consideration. Nevertheless, these studies will not become known to

world literature because they are in Turkish.² This is why the author does not refer to Turkish studies compliant with the contextualist approach.

Finally, in terms of language and style, the author offers a fluid work of about two hundred pages, without ever sacrificing scientific or academic diligence.

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² The following works bear traces of the contextualist approach: Mustafa Öztürk, *Kur'an'ı Kendi Tarihinde Okumak* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2004); Öztürk, *Kur'an Kıssalarının Mahiyeti* (İstanbul: Kuramer, 2016); Ömer Özsoy, *Kur'an ve Tarihsellik Yazıları* (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2004); Adil Çiftçi, *Bilgi Sosyolojisi ve İslâm Araştırmaları* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2015).