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Article

Contemporary Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Context of Revelation and the Context of Reading: A Critical Applied Study

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Abstract: The hermeneutical problem surrounding the context of revelation (siyāq al-tanzīl) and the context of reading (siyāq al-qirā'ah) is not confined to the narrow query of whether a specific verse was revealed in response to a particular historical event. Rather, the central question driving contemporary exegesis concerns the extent of interpretive authority conferred by historical context when defining textual meaning, and whether evolving socio-historical conditions permit a reconsideration of derived practical applications. This study investigates this problem through a critical examination of the hermeneutical frameworks of Fazlur Rahman, Abdullah Saeed, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, alongside a focused consideration of Amina Wadud's gender-sensitive readings. Employing a comparative analytical methodology, the research distinguishes between legal-linguistic meaning, historical circumstances of revelation, inferred ethical objectives (maqāṣid), and the characterization of novel contemporary cases. These theoretical models are evaluated across three empirical case studies: the verses on ẓihār (Q. 58:1–4), male authority/qiwāmah (Q. 4:34), and the prohibition of religious compulsion (Q. 2:256). The findings demonstrate that while historical contextualization is essential to avoid anachronistic interpretations and clarify practical ratios ('ilal), it does not independently authorize the abrogation or radical redefinition of clear normative injunctions. Furthermore, a reader's responsiveness to contemporary context does not inherently entail interpretive relativism; valid reading remains strictly contingent upon linguistic integrity, rigorous critique of historical reports, structural differentiation between universal principles and localized legal rulings, and proper legal characterization (taḥqīq al-manāṭ). The study proposes a transparent, four-tiered critical framework to evaluate contemporary hermeneutical claims rather than reducing interpretive debates to a simplistic binary between literalism and modernism.

Keywords: Context of revelation; Context of reading; Contextualist Qur'anic exegesis; Contemporary hermeneutics; Fazlur Rahman; Abdullah Saeed; Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd; Amina Wadud.

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1. Introduction

The inquiry into the relationship between the Qur'anic text and its historical context remains one of the most sensitive and contested issues in contemporary exegetical studies. In classical Islamic sciences,

disciplines such as asbāb al-nuzūl (occasions of revelation), al-makkī wa al-madanī (Meccan and Medinan classifications), al-nāsikh wa al-mansūkh (abrogation), and al-'ūmūm wa al-khuṣūṣ (generality and specificity) were developed to elucidate the socio-historical circumstances surrounding the revelation. Crucially, classical scholars maintained that historical occasions did not exhaust the comprehensive linguistic meaning of the divine discourse. Conversely, several contemporary hermeneutical projects treat history not merely as background data, but as an active constituent in the generation of meaning—questioning whether the reader is bound to replicate the historical intent within its initial 7th-century environment or extract universal ethical principles to be reformulated in modern societies. [1], [2], [3]

The debate is further complicated by the fact that interpretive divergence occurs prior to practical application; it emerges when formulating the fundamental questions posed to the text. For instance, reading a family-related ordinance as a regulation of an existing historical structure differs substantially from reading it as historical testimony to a broader movement of social reform, or using it primarily to abstract an independent moral value. While these analytical dimensions may intersect in a single reading, they do not possess equal evidentiary weight. Conflating them yields misleading conclusions, often conflating intrinsic textual meaning with socio-cultural deductions or modern normative preferences. [4], [5]

This study does not operate on an a priori assumption that every contemporary shift in application constitutes a violation of the text, nor does it presume that historical classical consensus guarantees absolute interpretive accuracy. Rather, it subjects the underlying chain of inference to rigorous scrutiny: Where does historical reporting end and linguistic structural analysis begin? At what precise junction does an analyst transition to discussing teleological objectives (maqāṣid), underlying ratios ('ilal), or legal verification of the ratio in modern cases (taḥqīq al-manāṭ)? Defining these methodological boundaries is essential to distinguish between legitimate hermeneutical variance and subjective readings that merely project contemporary desires onto scripture. [6], [7], [8], [9]

Research Problem and Questions

The central research problem addresses a pivotal methodological question: How does a contemporary exegete establish a methodologically binding connection between the context of revelation (siyāq al-tanzīl) and the context of reading (siyāq al-qirā'ah), and what objective criteria prevent historical contextualization from dissolving textual meaning, or reader-centric concerns from imposing arbitrary interpretive outcomes?

To address this primary problem, the study formulates the following sub-questions:

1. What are the conceptual definitions and evidentiary limits of 'context of revelation' and 'context of reading' in classical and modern scholarship?

2. What are the underlying premises, strengths, and methodological gaps in the frameworks of Fazlur Rahman, Abdullah Saeed, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd?

3. How do these hermeneutical models perform when applied to explicit Qur'anic verses with clear linguistic structures and established historical contexts?

4. What analytical criteria can effectively evaluate the validity of contemporary contextual readings without falling into rigid literalism or subjective relativism?

This study hypothesizes that contextual hermeneutics gains academic validity not merely by incorporating historical data, but by demonstrating precisely how historical data informs linguistic comprehension and proving the logical validity of transferring a textual ruling to a modern case.

Literature Review

Foundational contributions to contextual hermeneutics include Fazlur Rahman's 'Islam and Modernity' (1982), which introduced the double-movement theory; Abdullah Saeed's 'Interpreting the Qur'an' (2006) and 'Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century' (2014), which developed a hierarchy of values for ethico-legal texts; and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's 'Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ' (1990), which examined the cultural mechanics of textual formation. Rather than treating these works as passive background literature, this study utilizes them as primary empirical data. The specific contribution of this paper lies in testing these theoretical models against concrete legal verses—specifically examining whether disputes stem from historical report authenticity, syntactic capacity, ratio determination, or modern application. [10], [11], [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17]

Classical Context and Evidentiary Limits

In classical terminology, the context of revelation is not synonymous with asbāb al-nuzūl (occasions of revelation). While classical asbāb al-nuzūl refers specifically to a documented event or question directly coinciding with the revelation of a verse, the broader concept of context encompasses the Meccan/Medinan environment, discourse structure, inter-textual arrangement, and contemporary socio-linguistic conventions. Methodologically, an analyst must not treat these historical elements as having uniform evidential certainty; documented chains of transmission (asnād), late historical descriptions, and speculative reconstructions of pre-Islamic customs possess varying evidentiary weight that requires rigorous Hadith and historical critique. [2], [3], [4], [5]

This nuance is particularly critical regarding the classic legal maxim: 'Consideration is given to the generality of the language, not the specificity of the cause' (al-'ibrah bi-'umūm al-lafẓ lā bi-khuṣūṣ al-sabab). While this rule ensures that a general wording is not restricted solely to the original historical incident, certain modern applications misuse it to strip history of all explanatory function. Conversely, radical historicist readings invalidate textual generality simply because an incident preceded the law. Both extremes are methodologically flawed; a specific cause may serve as crucial contextual evidence clarifying an ambiguous expression without nullifying explicit general wording unless supported by clear legal evidence. [6], [8]

On the other hand, the 'context of reading' does not merely denote a later time period. It represents a complex matrix of institutional questions, epistemological frameworks, socio-economic realities, and evolving linguistic usage. While reading context legitimately shapes the questions brought to scripture and reveals novel application scenarios, the mere presence of a modern reader-interest does not constitute linguistic evidence for modifying textual meaning. Furthermore, full historical reconstruction of the 7th-century context is epistemologically impossible due to gaps and variances in historical reports. Therefore, historical knowledge provides probabilistic approximation rather than absolute, unassailable certainty. [7], [9]

Contemporary Hermeneutical Frameworks

Fazlur Rahman and the Double-Movement Methodology

Fazlur Rahman formulated his double-movement theory as a critique of two dominant approaches: traditionalist preservation of specific historical rulings without grasping their underlying ethos, and secular modernization that abandons Qur'anic anchorage. Rahman proposed that moving back to the revelation environment is a necessary intermediate step to extract universal moral-legal principles, rather than an end in itself. [10], [11]

In the first movement, the scholar moves from the modern situation to the historical context of revelation to analyze the specific ratio and moral ethos behind Qur'anic responses. In the second movement, the scholar returns to the contemporary context to apply these universal moral principles to present realities. While Rahman's model rightly emphasizes holistic textual reading over isolated verse analysis, a critical gap remains: it fails to specify clear criteria for determining whether a derived moral principle functions as a interpretative guide for ambiguous texts or as a overarching meta-norm capable of overriding explicit, unambiguous textual commands. [10], [11]

Abdullah Saeed and Contextualism in Ethico-Legal Texts

Abdullah Saeed refines contextualist hermeneutics by establishing a structured methodology specifically tailored for ethico-legal texts. Saeed categorizes Qur'anic values into a hierarchy: foundational/universal values (e.g., justice, compassion), instructional values, and transactional/localized provisions closely tied to 7th-century Arabia's cultural matrix. [12], [13], [18]

The primary strength of Saeed's framework is its practical applicability to legal verses and its acknowledgment of classical exegesis. However, a major methodological challenge arises in establishing objective, shared criteria for ranking values within this hierarchy. Without standardized evaluative rules, different readers can manipulate value hierarchies to justify predetermined conclusions, raising the question of whether a modern ruling stems from genuine textual evidence or subjective prioritization. [19], [20]

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: Text, History, and Hermeneutics

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd shifts the inquiry to a socio-cultural and semiotic plane, examining how meaning is generated through language and culture. In 'Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ', Abu Zayd analyzes revelation as a cultural product (muntağ thaqāfī) in its formation phase that subsequently became a culture-

producing text (muntiğ lil-thaqāfah). He stresses that human interpretation is fundamentally historical and distinct from the divine text itself. [14], [15]

Abu Zayd's work offers vital critical value by dismantling the conflation of human exegetical commentary (such as al-Ṭabarī or al-Rāzī) with the sacred text. Nevertheless, a methodological tension persists in his work: while acknowledging that human understanding is historically conditioned, scripture must retain an intrinsic semantic structure capable of correcting valid from invalid readings. Without clear linguistic controls, textual interpretation risks dissolving into subjective projection. [16]

Amina Wadud: Gender and the Positionality of the Reader

Amina Wadud provides an applied gender-sensitive reading, arguing that traditional exegesis was overwhelmingly shaped by male experiences and patriarchal cultural norms. In 'Qur'an and Woman', Wadud advocates reading scripture through a holistic hermeneutic focused on absolute moral equality and tawḥīdic worldview. [17], [21]

Wadud rightly highlights how socio-historical assumptions influenced classical commentaries. However, her framework must continuously meet the standard of rigorous philological and legal demonstration. Re-evaluating established commentary requires proving that alternative readings are grammatically and syntactically superior, rather than relying solely on alignment with contemporary egalitarian discourses. [21]

2. Materials and Methods

The research employs a tripartite methodology: descriptive-analytical reconstruction of contemporary models from primary texts, critical comparative evaluation of their theoretical premises, and empirical exegetical application across three selected Qur'anic passages. The study strictly maintains a distinction between an author's explicit statements and the researcher's critical analytical deductions. The scope is limited to analyzing the chain of inference between revelation context and reading context across the selected projects, rather than providing an exhaustive historical survey of modern hermeneutics.

The primary sources examined were the selected Qur'anic passages (Q. 58:1–4, Q. 4:34, and Q. 2:256), relevant classical exegetical interpretations, and the published theoretical works of Rahman, Saeed, Abu Zayd, and Wadud. The comparative analysis distinguished four dimensions: historical report authenticity, textual and linguistic interpretation, ethical and legal inference, and application to contemporary circumstances. These dimensions were applied consistently to the three cases; the study does not claim a quantitative or participant-based empirical design. [2], [8], [10], [12], [14], [17]

3. Results

The comparative textual analysis identified three results: first, the historical occasions of revelation provide interpretive evidence but cannot by themselves cancel general textual language; second, contemporary contextual models differ in the weight assigned to ethical objectives, linguistic form, and reader circumstances; and third, the three selected Qur'anic cases require distinguishing original legal or theological meaning from proposed modern applications. These are analytical findings drawn from the textual case studies, not statistical results.

3.1. The Verses of Ẓihār (Q. 58:1–4)

Qur'an 58:1–4 addresses the pre-Islamic practice of ẓihār (a husband's oath equating his wife to his mother's back): 'Allah has heard the speech of her who disputes with you concerning her husband and complains to Allah...' Exegetical reports in al-Ṭabarī confirm this revelation responded to a specific marital dispute involving Khawlah bint Tha'labah and Awf ibn al-Ṣāmit. [1], [2], [3]

Applying Rahman's double movement demonstrates how the text intervened to abolish a damaging pre-Islamic verbal custom and protect family stability. However, the verse does not merely articulate an abstract moral intent; it lays down specific, tiered legal expiations (kaffārah). Modern attempts to replace ẓihār entirely with generic terms like 'verbal abuse' overlook the precise legal nature of ẓihār in jurisprudence. While generic verbal abuse is morally condemned under general rules prohibiting harm (lā ḍarar), specific ẓihār rulings require precise linguistic and legal verification (taḥqīq al-manāṭ). [6], [10]

3.2. Male Authority / Qiwāmah (Q. 4:34)

Qur'an 4:34 states: 'Men are caretakers/protectors (qawwāmūn) over women because Allah has given

the one more than the other and because they spend (bi-mā anfaqū) from their means...' Classical commentators like al-Ṭabarī linked qiwāmah to financial maintenance and household leadership within a specific socio-economic structure. [1], [8], [17]

Contemporary readings (such as Wadud and Saeed) examine whether qiwāmah is a fixed, absolute prerogative or a conditional responsibility contingent upon financial provision and mutual consultation. Linguistically, 'qawwāmūn' is an intensive form built upon maintenance and responsibility, linked to two explicit textual causes: comparative preference and financial expenditure. Methodologically, analyzing whether modern dual-income households alter the application ratio requires rigorous legal analysis of ratio verification (taḥqīq al-manāṭ), rather than simply discarding the textual ruling. [12], [13], [17]

3.3. Freedom of Religion (Q. 2:256)

Qur'an 2:256 explicitly declares: 'There is no compulsion in religion (lā ikrāha fī al-dīn); the right direction is clearly distinct from error.' Historical reports in al-Ṭabarī discuss occasions involving Medinan parents attempting to force their converted children to remain in or return to Islam/Judaism. [1], [2], [7]

Despite specific historical reports, the grammatical phrasing ('lā' of absolute negation with generic noun 'ikrāh') establishes a general normative rule. In modern discourse, this verse is frequently cited to justify comprehensive modern concepts of freedom of conscience and religious citizenship. Methodologically, while the text undeniably establishes the invalidity of coerced belief, extending this textual statement to modern legal and constitutional frameworks requires explicit theoretical bridging between theological principles and contemporary state governance. [12], [18]

4. Discussion

The results indicate that the interpretive disagreement is not simply a conflict between fidelity to scripture and adaptation to contemporary life. Rather, the decisive methodological issue is how a reader moves from historical evidence to a linguistic interpretation, then to an inferred ethical or legal rationale, and finally to a contemporary application. Rahman's double movement is particularly useful for clarifying the moral purpose of a historically situated instruction, while Saeed's value-based contextualism identifies different levels of ethico-legal claims. However, neither model can substitute the articulation of a defensible textual and legal inference. [10], [12], [13], [18]

The ẓihār case illustrates the difference between a general ethical concern and a specified legal category: a contemporary objection to harmful speech may be consistent with the verse's broader moral direction without making every form of verbal abuse legally identical to ẓihār. In the qiwāmah case, historical patterns of financial support and household responsibility help frame interpretation, but changes in social arrangements demand a reasoned assessment of the operative rationale rather than an automatic transfer or cancellation of the ruling. The prohibition of religious compulsion shows how a general linguistic formulation may remain normatively significant even when its application to modern constitutional and citizenship arrangements requires further argument. [2], [6], [8], [10], [17]

Abu Zayd's account of textual formation and reception draws attention to the historicity of interpretive practice, whereas Wadud's gender-sensitive reading exposes the role of reader positionality in conventional exegesis. Their contributions make the interpretive process more critically self-aware, but the persuasive force of a proposed reinterpretation still depends on philological, historical, and juristic demonstration. The present analysis therefore supports a structured evaluation in which historical reconstruction, linguistic plausibility, the derived rationale, and contemporary case verification are addressed separately rather than conflated. [14], [15], [16], [17], [21]

4.1. Proposed Four-Tier Critical Framework

The empirical case studies demonstrate the inadequacy of simplistic binaries dividing exegesis into 'literalist' and 'contextualist' camps. To establish a rigorous, transparent evaluation of contemporary interpretations, this study proposes a four-tiered critical framework:

1. Historical Authenticity Tier (Martabat al-Thubūt): Rigorous Hadith and historical verification of reported occasions of revelation to prevent basing interpretations on weak historical reports.

2. Textual-Linguistic Tier (Martabat al-Lughah wa al-Naẓm): Examination of syntactic capacity, lexical boundaries, and inter-textual cohesion to ensure readings remain within legitimate semantic bounds.

3. Inferential-Ratio Tier (Martabat al-Istinbāṭ): Explicit articulation of derived legal ratios ('ilal), ethical objectives (maqāṣid), and universal values.

4. Application Tier (Martabat al-Tanzīl): Careful legal verification (taḥqīq al-manāṭ) when applying derived rulings or principles to novel contemporary socio-legal realities.

4.2. Limitations and Implications

This qualitative textual study examines three selected Qur'anic passages and a limited group of contemporary hermeneutical projects; its findings are therefore methodological rather than representative of all exegetical traditions. The analysis does not independently authenticate every historical report or adjudicate all disputed juristic rulings. Further studies may test the four-tier framework against a broader corpus of legal and theological verses, report variants, and interpretive traditions. The practical implication is that interpreters should explicitly disclose the evidence supporting each transition from revelation context to present-day application.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that historical contextualization is indispensable for understanding textual intent and application boundaries, yet history alone cannot override explicit linguistic structures. Furthermore, addressing modern reader contexts does not inherently lead to interpretive relativism when bound by rigorous philological and methodological controls. Preserving the structural boundaries between textual meaning, historical cause, universal moral ethos, and practical application is essential for valid exegesis. Contemporary contextual models must provide transparent criteria for value hierarchies and ratio determination rather than relying on abstract ethical generalizations. Classical Islamic jurisprudence possessed sophisticated mechanisms for contextual reasoning (such as taḥqīq al-manāṭ and maqāṣid), which contemporary scholarship should integrate rather than dismiss.

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