

# Intra-Quranic connections in Sunni and Shi'i tafsirs: a meeting point or another area of contestation?

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## Abstract

This study seeks to shed light on how a celebrated interpretive approach to the Quran considered to be most objective is taken by interpreters from different theological settings. It takes a closer look at how the principle of *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* (interpretation of the Quran by the Quran) is employed by al-Shanqiti in his *Aḍwā' al-Bayān* and al-Tabataba'i in his *al-Mizān*, taking their interpretation of *ahl al-bayt* as a main case in point. Noticing how their differences in this issue can be associated with their respective Sunni and Shi'i backgrounds, this study finds a number of areas where both modern exegetes – and other exegetes most likely – might be influenced by any creeping theological preference in their pursuit of objectivity and openness to the text.

Kajian ini bermaksud menelaah bagaimana sebuah pendekatan penafsiran al-Qur'an yang dianggap paling objektif diterapkan oleh para mufasir dari latar belakang aliran teologi yang berbeda. Bagaimana prinsip menafsirkan al-Qur'an dengan al-Qur'an diaplikasikan oleh al-Shanqiti dalam tafsirnya, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, dan al-Tabataba'i dalam tafsirnya, *al-Mizān*, dilihat lebih saksama terutama dengan mengambil contoh penafsiran mereka tentang ahlulbait. Mencermati bagaimana

perbedaan mereka dalam menafsirkan cakupan ahul bait bisa dikaitkan dengan latar belakang Sunni dan Syiah mereka, kajian ini menemukan sejumlah ranah di mana kedua mufasir modern ini – dan sepertinya juga mufasir yang lain – bisa saja dipengaruhi oleh kecenderungan teologis ketika mencoba menjaga objektivitas dan keterbukaan terhadap teks al-Qur'an.

**Keywords:** *Quranic hermeneutics; Sunni-Shi'i dialog; al-Shanqiti' al-Tabataba'i; Ahl al-bayt*

## Introduction

Is it possible to arrive at objective (and original) meaning of the Quranic text? This question has raised a debate among modern Muslim intellectuals who pursue renewed approaches to the Quran. Fazlur Rahman, Aisha 'Abd al-Rahman Bint al-Shati', Nurcholish Madjid, Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd – among others – are those who evidently believe in the possibility of finding or discovering the (most) objective meaning,<sup>1</sup> while Hassan Hanafi, Farid Esack, Abdul Karim Soroush, Mohamad Mojtahed Shabestari and Muhammad Shahrour are among the proponents of the notion of partiality of any interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For studies which examine their hermeneutics and support this conclusion, read Yudian Wahyudi, *The Slogan "Back to the Qur'an and the Sunna": A Comparative Study of the Responses of Hasan Hanafi, Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri and Nurcholish Madjid*, a Ph.D. dissertation at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 2002, 207-308; Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer*, Yogyakarta: LKIS, 2010, 115-330; Yusuf Rahman, *The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur'an*, a Ph.D. dissertation at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 2001; Sahiron Syamsuddin, *An Examination of Bint al-Shati's Method of Interpreting the Qur'an*, an M.A. thesis at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 1998.

<sup>2</sup>For studies which examine their hermeneutics and support this conclusion, read Yudian Wahyudi, *The Slogan "Back to the Qur'an and the Sunna"*, 207-308; Katajun Amirpur, "The Changing Approach to the Text: Iranian Scholars and the Qur'an", *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, No. 3, 2005: 337-350; Farzin Vahdat, "Post-revolutionary Islamic Modernity in Iran: The Intersubjective Hermeneutics of Mohamad Mojtahed Shabestari", in Suha Taji-Farouki (ed.), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, London: Oxford University Press, 2004, 193-223; Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer*, 115-330; Andreas Christmann, "The Form is Permanent, but the Content Moves: the Quranic Text and Its Interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrour's *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān*", in Suha Taji-Farouki (ed.), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 263-295.

Inside but sometimes also outside this debate, there have been modern quests for "valid" and "objective" interpretive approaches to the Quran, mostly evident in continued efforts to free the text from perceived non-Quranic superimposed ideas and other texts – including the bulk of previous Quranic exegeses as well as hadith texts – so as to avoid what so-called "tendentious interpretation" or what Nasr Abu Zayd calls (ideological)"coloration" (*talwīn*). Such efforts have been a common strategy of modern scholars to delegitimize not only many of previous exegeses (predominantly the ones categorized as *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*) but also some of contemporary approaches which tend to be very functionalist.

Arguably the most central of these quests is an idea interchangeably called as to be faithful to Quranic worldview, to treat the Quran as a unity,<sup>3</sup> to make the Quran as a criterion for any interpretation, to regard the Quran itself as the best guide to it, and to interpret the Quran with the Quran itself (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*). This idea is shared – though differently applied for different purposes – by modern textualists as well as many of contextualists, and even functionalists. The idea is applied both in the modern style of thematic Qur'an interpretation and the classical chained Qur'an commentary format. It is an idea usually built upon a classical concept *al-Qur'ān yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan* (Quranic parts interpret one another) or *istantiq al-Qur'ān* (let the Quran speak), and a belief that it is the best method of interpretation which might entail the highest level of authenticity. Amir Islahi, Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti, Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i, Fazlur

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<sup>3</sup>For an extensive review of Muslim scholars' ideas on the unity of the Qur'an, see Amir FaisholFath, *The Unity of al-Qur'an*, Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, 2011, previously a dissertation at the Islamabad International Islamic University entitled, *Naẓariyat al-Wiḥdah al-Qur'āniyah 'inda 'Ulamā' al-Muslimīn wa Dawruhā fi al-Fikr al-Islāmī*.

Rahman, Bint al-Shati', Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Sa'id Hawwa, Muhammad Shahrour – and the list can still go on – are among modern exegetes whose hermeneutics is principally, though not exclusively, based on this idea.<sup>4</sup>

While whether or not the application of such an idea could be truly impartial or un-ideological remains a (largely philosophical) question to answer, those scholarly efforts have revealed a large number of what is supposed to be intra-Quranic connections and parallels. These achievements, however, have not yet received much attention from contemporary researchers.

### **The most acclaimed way of interpretation**

The most oft-quoted scholar in great favor of the idea is arguably Ibn Taymiyah. In his *Muqaddimah fi Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, with regard to ways of interpreting the Quran, firstly he states, "The best method in it [tafsir] is that the Quran be interpreted by the Quran."<sup>5</sup> This suggestion has been echoed by many scholars, some of whom exactly repeat his words or at least use his expressions, "*aṣaḥḥ al-ṭuruq*" (the most correct method) and "*aḥsan ṭuruq al-tafsīr*" (the best way of interpre-

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<sup>4</sup>For studies which examine their works in Quranic hermeneutics and support this conclusion, read Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an: A Study of Islahī's Concept of Nazm in Tadabbur-i Qur'an*, Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986; 'Adnan Al Shalash, *al-'Allāmah al-Shanqīṭī Mufasssiran: Dirāsah Manhajīyah fi Tafsīrihi al-Musammā Aḍwā' al-Bayān fi Ḍḍāḥ al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*, 2005; Louis Abraham Medoff, *Ijtihad and Renewal in Quranic Hermeneutics: An Analysis on Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'īs al-Mizān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, a dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley, 2007; Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer*; Sahiron Syamsuddin, *An Examination of Bint al-Shati's Method of Interpreting the Qur'an*; Sahiron Syamsuddin, "The Qur'an in Syria: Muhammad Shahrur's Inner-Quranic Exegetical Method", in Khaleel Mohammed and Andrew Rippin (eds.), *Coming to Terms with the Qur'an*, North Haledon: Islamic Publications International, 2008, 267-283.

<sup>5</sup>Abd al-Halim ibn Taymiyah, *Muqaddimah fi Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1997, 84. The same statement could also be found in his *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, n.d., vol. 2, 231.

tation), to identify the method.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, other scholars variably refer to this method as "*aqrab al-ṭuruq ilā al-ṣidq wa al-ṣawāb*" (the closest method to truthfulness and correctness),<sup>7</sup> "*min ablagh al-tafāsīr*" (among the most reliable interpretation),<sup>8</sup> "*ashraf anwā' al-tafsīr wa ajalluhā*" (the most reputable and highly regarded interpretation),<sup>9</sup> "*aqdam al-ṭuruq al-ma'thūrah*" (the oldest inherited method of interpretation),<sup>10</sup> part of (together with *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr al-ṣaḥīḥ*) "*aṣaḥḥ ṭuruq al-tafsīr wa aḥsanuhā wa aslamuhā min al-inḥirāf wa al-i'wijāj*" (the most correct method of interpretation as well as the best and the safest of it from any deviation or divergence),<sup>11</sup> "*aqwā anwā' al-tafsīr*" (the strongest type of interpretation),<sup>12</sup> "*aḥamm al-khuṭuwāt al-manhajīyah li al-tafsīr*" (the most important methodological step in interpretation) or "*khuṭuwah asāsīyah li al-tafsīr*" (a fundamental step in interpretation) or "*aḥamm khuṭuwāt al-tafsīr wa awwaluhā*" (the most important and first step in interpretation),<sup>13</sup> and the best choice among available alternatives of interpretation,<sup>14</sup> or the first necessary step to take on in interpreting

<sup>6</sup>See for instance Isma'il ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Aẓīm*, Cairo: Mu'assasah Qurtūbah, 2000, vol. 1, 6; Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Zarkashi, *al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1984, vol. 2, 175; Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011, 161.

<sup>7</sup>Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d., vol. 10, 42.

<sup>8</sup>Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah, *al-Tibyān fī Aqṣām al-Qur'ān*, Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1416 AH, 185.

<sup>9</sup>Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān fī Tīdāḥ al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*, Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 1426 AH, vol. 1, 8.

<sup>10</sup>Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'ī, *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Alamī li al-Maṭbū'āt, 1973, vol. 1, 14.

<sup>11</sup>Tahir Mahmud Muhammad Ya'qub, *Asbāb al-Khaṭa' fī al-Tafsīr: Dirāsah Taṣīliyah*, Cairo: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1425 AH, 49, 91.

<sup>12</sup>Khalid 'Uthman al-Sabt, *Qawā'id al-Tafsīr: Jam'anwa Dirāsah*, Dār Ibn 'Affān, n.d., vol. 1, 109. Tahir Mahmud, *Asbāb al-Khaṭa' fī al-Tafsīr*, 91.

<sup>13</sup>Salah 'Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi, *Ta'rīf al-Dārisīn bi Manāḥij al-Mufasssīrīn*, Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2008, 147, 150.

<sup>14</sup>For instance, Ibn Juza, *al-Tashīl li 'Ulūm al-Tanzīl*, vol. 1, 9.

the Quran.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, many have implied that there has been a wide consensus (*ijmā'*) among Muslim scholars on that this method is not only a must in interpreting the Quran but also the first thing to do or even the best, most authoritative and highest procedure of interpretation.<sup>16</sup> It is even hard to find any scholar who challenges such an assumption. Its importance is simply regarded as "cannot be seriously challenged."<sup>17</sup> One could even find an assertion that this method "has to be followed and accepted without any doubt or any reserve."<sup>18</sup>

If one bears in mind the debate over whether interpretation is always partial or not, such a statement would then be a question: if interpreting the Quran by the Quran should be considered to be the best or the most valid method of interpretation, can it be a method from which an interpreter of the Quran seeks help to minimize or avoid biased projections onto the text? Put differently, one might ask: can it be a method which leads an interpreter away from any ideological coloration?

The answer might for the most part support the objectivists' argument that a certain adequate hermeneutical method can help minimize biases or even arrive at objective meaning (often assumed as located within the text), or otherwise by and large confirm the premise of those like so-called "functionalists" (or liberative theologians) that interpretation is always partial, so does meaning (assumed as always in process). And yet, the answer might also be disputed by, or seen differently from, both perspectives.

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<sup>15</sup>Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *al-Itqān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Cairo: Dār al-H{adīth, 2006, vol. 4, 455; Khalid 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Akk, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Qawā'iduhu*, Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1986,79.

<sup>16</sup>Al-Shanqīti, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, 8; al-'Akk, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, 79; Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction*, London & New York: Routledge, 2008, 179.

<sup>17</sup>Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an...*, 165.

<sup>18</sup>Tahir Mahmud, *Asbāb al-Khaṭa' fi al-Tafsīr...*, 91.

Why interpreting the Quran by the Quran comes to be the best method and how we should employ it are perhaps questions more immediately in mind while reading Ibn Taymiyah's statement abovementioned. However, rather than arguing why it be the best and how to put it into practice, Ibn Taymiyah straight away turns to the issue of the possibility or necessity of applying the method in his next two sentences. He states, "Where the Quran sums up (a point), the same point is elaborated in another place. What is briefly mentioned in one place is explained in detail in another place."<sup>19</sup> Such a notion oft-referred to as (part of) the concept of the Quran being self-explanatory (*al-Qur'an yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan*) – which has also been over and over again repeated by classical and contemporary scholars – implies that there are intra-Quranic connections and parallels, i.e. internal links between Quranic verses in a certain sura and other verses in other suras or in another distant part of the sura, or between a Quranic verse and the surrounding verses (*al-sābiq wa al-lāhiq*), to which any interpreter should pay much attention.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, given there has been only very limited examples available from interpreters of the Quran in early days (including the Prophet himself),<sup>21</sup> interpreters are readily faced by a question to answer: which verses explain/interpret which verses – a problem which requires them to perform a

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<sup>19</sup>Ibn Taymiyah, *Muqaddimah fi Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, 84. Interestingly, these statements are the only brief (but often quoted) explanation on the importance of interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an available in the book. After these sentences, he straight away starts an extended discussion on another topic related to interpretation through Sunnah and the sayings of the *salaf*.

<sup>20</sup>Intra-Quranic parallels have been recognized in *'ulūm al-Qur'an* through the concept of *naẓā'ir* (usually paired with *wujūh*). For a summary of this concept, see Fahd ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rumi, *Buḥūth fi Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Manāhijihī*, Maktabat al-Tawbah, n.d.

<sup>21</sup>There have been only two examples narrated from the Prophet mentioned by al-Suyuti while listing interpretations narrated from the Prophet in the last part of *al-Itqān*, vol. 4, 488-534. The first is al-An'am [6]: 82 which is explained by Luqmān [31]: 13, and the second is Ibrāhīm [14]: 17 which is explained by Muḥammad [40]: 15 and al-Kahf [18]: 29.

careful *ijtihād* ("scholarly creative endeavour"). In fact, *ijtihād* might not only give rise to differences but also be incorrect.<sup>22</sup> Keeping in mind the previous issue of partiality, one can therefore pose another question: are those links pursued through *ijtihād* something often (if not always) agreed upon or merely another area of contestation among Qur'an interpreters? For one thing, if the links serve as another contested area, then our previous question regarding the potentials of interpreting the Quran by the Quran to lead an interpreter to impartial interpretation might easily be answered.

Another way to formulate the preceding question is: to what extent can this interpretive method be a meeting point for Muslims from different schools of thought?

### **Two Sunni and Shi'i tafsirs most intensively applying the method**

This study seeks to answer the last question so as to provide some insights to answer earlier questions. In doing so, this study will primarily take the cases of two modern Qur'an exegeses which have not only been among the most intensive full-scale sequential tafsirs in terms of the application of the methodology of interpreting the Quran by the Quran to date, but also written by two *'allāmahs* of the same period coming from two very different theological schools each of which has been largely critical to the other throughout history.

The two exegeses are *al-Mizān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by an Iranian Shi'i scholar al-'Allāmah Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'ī (1904-1981) and *Aḍwā' al-Bayān fi Ṭiqāḥ al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān* by a Mauritanian-born Saudi Sunni/Salafi scholar al-'Allāmah Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti (1907-1973).<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, both tafsirs are arguably based on

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<sup>22</sup>Khalid al-Sabt, *Qawā'id al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 107, 109; Tahir Mahmud, *Asbāb al-Khata'*, 96.

<sup>23</sup>There have been several studies on these two works and their authors' methodology of Qur'an interpretation. Among earlier standard studies on al-Tabataba'ī's *al-Mizān* most relevant

the application of *tadabbur* and *istinṭāq* (al-Tabataba'ī's key concepts of inner-Quranic hermeneutics respectively meaning "contemplation" and "allowing the Quran speak for itself") or *īdāḥ al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān* ("explaining the Quran by the Quran", al-Shanqiti's term) in a more serious and fashionable manner.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, one could expect that the very fact that these works are authored by a Shi'i and a (Salafi) Sunni in particular might shed light on the existence – or the absence – of a kind of consensus among Qur'an interpreters pertaining to "which verses explain which verses" and thereby reveal a meeting point – or merely another contested field – between the two groups.

To provide a comprehensive answer to the above question might require a more thorough and prolonged, extensive study – while this study can at best be its preliminary part. Here I would like to highlight some arguments one might find from closely looking at a few ex-

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to this study are: 'Ali al-Awsi, *al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī wa Manhajuhu fi Tafsihihi al-Mizān*, 1985; Louis Abraham Medoff, *Ijtihad and Renewal in Quranic Hermeneutics*; and Mohammad Hossein Mokhtari, *The Exegesis of Tabataba'ei and the Hermeneutics of Hirsch: A Comparative Study*, a Ph.D. dissertation at the Durham University, 2007. On al-Shanqiti's tafsir and methodology, there is: Adnan Al Shalash, *al-'Allamah al-Shanqitī Mufasssiran: Dirāsah Manhajiyah fi Tafsihihi al-Musammā Ad}wā' al-Bayān fi Īdāḥ al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*, which is among the most recent standard studies on his tafsir. There have been also many MA theses submitted in Middle Eastern universities discussing al-Shanqiti's work and approach. Different from earlier relevant studies, this study will exclusively examine the method of interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an (*tafsir al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*) – sometimes referred to as "cross-referential hermeneutics" or "inner-Quranic exegetical method" – as conceived and practiced by al-Tabataba'ī and al-Shanqiti in their respective commentaries. On this method of tafsir, a recent and more relevant work is Muhsin Hamid Mutayri, *Tafsir al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān: Ta'sīl wa Taqwīm*, Riyad: Dār al-Tadmu'iyah, 2011.

<sup>24</sup>Based on some statistical comparisons between both tafsirs and other tafsirs recognized as employing the method, my previous study finds that al-Shanqiti's *Aḍwā' al-Bayān* is arguably the one most dependent upon the method, followed by al-Qasimi's *Mahāsīn al-Ta'wīl*, al-Tabataba'ī's *al-Mizān*, Ibn Kathir's *Tafsir al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, and al-Razi's *Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb*. A more qualitative analysis on these tafsirs, however, would reveal that al-Tabataba'ī's *al-Mizān* is among the ones most deeply highlight the connection between parts of the Qur'an – similar to Medoff's conclusion that al-Tabataba'ī employed the methodology of *istinṭāq* in an unprecedented way in terms of intensity and intensiveness. Hence, it might be argued that both tafsirs are the ones intensively applying the method of interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an.

amples of interpretation in both tafsirs. In this regard, given the fact that many differences between the two theological schools are mainly related to the question of "who",<sup>25</sup> I would take the case of interpretation of *ahl al-bayt* (mainly in al-Aḥzāb [33]: 33, known as "tathīr [purification] verse") and – to a lesser extent – *alladhīna an'amta 'alayhim* (mainly in al-Fātiḥah [1]: 7) to discuss both tafsirs.

### **A meeting point in tafsir between Sunni and Shi'i?**

The fact that the notion to interpret the Quran with the Quran itself is supported and implemented by both Sunni and Shi'i scholars might be a reason to argue that this method is a potential meeting point in tafsir between Shi'a and Sunni. Both al-Tabataba'i and al-Shanqiti are aware of the importance of this method. Al-Tabataba'i wrote *al-Mizān* to demonstrate a methodology of *istintāq* (allowing the Quran speak for itself), i.e. by interpreting the Quran with the Quran. In his view, this way of interpretation is the oldest, inherited method of interpretation (*aqdam al-ṭuruq al-ma'thūrah*), which has been unfortunately largely neglected (*matrūk ghayr maslūk*). This method is a valid way – even the most valid one – to interpret the Quran. It is an authentic Quranic hermeneutics based on correct principles. Al-Tabataba'i is critical to classical and contemporary tafsirs much filled with the interpreters' personal opinion or too dependent on using *riwāyāt* (narrated traditions), rather than using the Quran to elaborate the meaning of its verses. The best choice to interpret the Quran, to al-Tabataba'i, is by *tadabbur* (contemplation) to a point that we find Quranic verses are self-interpreting. Quranic verses explain and support each other (*yantiqū ba'duhu ba'dan*

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<sup>25</sup>Sunni and Shi'a are disputing, for instance, who the legitimate caliph after the Prophet was (Abu Bakr or 'Ali), who the role models more important to Muslim religiosity after the Prophet are (Saḥāba or Ahl al-Bayt), etc.

*wa yashhadu ba'duhu ba'dan*). The immediate advantage of applying this methodology is that we will never interpret a verse contrary to its *zāhir* (the obvious, immediate meaning of the text).

Avoiding to interpret the Quran contrary to its *zāhir* is also important for al-Shanqiti, who seemed to have been much influenced by Ibn Taymiyah's thought – either in tafsir or salafism in general. His work, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān* is firstly and mainly aimed at explaining the Quran with the Quran (*īdāh al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*), a method he calls "the most reputable and highly regarded interpretation" (*ashraf an wā' al-tafsir wa ajalluhā*)<sup>26</sup> and included in the title of his tafsir. Some studies on his tafsir finds that its strength lies in the application of *tafsir al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*.<sup>27</sup>

If one looks at intra-Quranic connections revealed by both exegetes resulted from their application of the method, the argument that it is a common ground in tafsir between Sunni and Shi'a might be affirmed. Intra-Quranic connections in these two tafsirs seems to be, most of the time, complementary, rather than contradictory. They are even sometimes identical. Below are some rather purposively selected examples of intra-Quranic connections both scholars agree upon, along with a list of intra-Quranic connections mentioned by only one of the two.

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<sup>26</sup>This claim seems to be based on an assumption that no one is more knowledgeable on the meaning of Allah's sayings than Allah Himself. See al-Shanqīṭi, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān...*, 8.

<sup>27</sup>For instance, Ahmad Lafi Falah al-Matiri, "Dalālat al-Siyāq al-Qur'ānīfi Tafsir Aḍwā' al-Bayān li al-'Allāmah al-Shanqīṭi: Dirāsah Mawḍū'iyah Taḥlīliyyahan M.A. thesis at the University of Jordania, 2007, 40.

Interpreted Quranic word/phrase/verse	"Interpreting" Quranic verses		
	Both mention	Mentioned only by al-Tabataba'í	Mentioned only by al-Shanqiti
<i>Al-Raḥmān</i> [1: 1 or 1: 3]	20: 5	19: 75	25: 59 67: 19 55: 1-3
<i>Al-Raḥim</i> [1: 1 or 1: 3]	33: 43 9: 117	-	-
<i>Al-ladhīna an'amta 'alayhim</i> [1: 7]	4: 69	4: 65-6 57: 19 58: 11 5: 55	-
16: 99-100	15: 42 36: 60	-	38: 82-3 17: 65 34: 20-1 14: 22 19: 44 4: 76
<i>Al-Qawl</i> [36: 7]	38: 84-5 37: 31 39: 71 10: 96	15: 42-3 16: 106-8	41: 25 28: 63 36: 70 11: 118-9 32: 13
<i>Wa naktubu ma qaddamū wa atsarahum wa kull shay' aḥṣaynā hu fi imām mubīn</i> [36: 12]	45: 29 17: 13	6: 59 45: 28	43: 80 17: 14 18: 49 50: 18 16: 25 29: 13 75: 13 82: 5 9: 121 72: 28 6: 38

This does not mean, however, that both exegetes have always had the same understanding about what these intra-Quranic connections they agree upon could mean – or not mean. Their interpretation on *al-ladhīna an'amta 'alayhim* (those on whom God has bestowed His grace) is an example. Both argue that the people God has bestowed favor are those mentioned in al-Nisā' [4]: 69, consisting of *al-nabiyyūn*,

*al-ṣiddiqūn*, *al-shuhadā'* and *al-ṣāliḥūn*. Nevertheless, for al-Shanqiti, this verse justifies the legitimacy of the caliphate of Abu Bakr, a companion the Prophet called *al-ṣiddiq*. On the other hand, while discussing the verse, al-Tabataba'i points out that al-Mā'idah [5]: 55, a verse believed to be a sanction of the virtue and the right of *walāyah* (leadership) that 'Ali ibn Abi Talib had, might explain the meaning of what he calls *aṣḥāb al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (those on the straight path – upon whom God has bestowed favor, that is suggested in the end of al-Nisā' [4]: 69 as the best of friends).

In addition, the fact that intra-Quranic connections both exegetes find are very often complementary and sometimes just the same, does not mean that both are necessarily free from theological biases when connecting – or not connecting – a certain part of the Quran to its another part. A theological bias, I would argue, can still possibly dictate an interpreter's choice of which part of the Quran he would refer to – or not refer to – while discussing a certain Quranic verse, phrase or word. Al-Tabataba'i's and al-Shanqiti's discussions on the meaning of *ahl al-bayt*, are perhaps a good example.

### **The scope of Ahl al-Bayt debated**

Who *ahl al-bayt* consists of has been subject to varying interpretations – even among scholars within the same sectarian background. There has been, however, a quite noticeable difference between sectarian lines. Most of Shi'i scholars believe that it refers specifically to *ahl al-kisā'* (People of the Cloak), namely 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, his wife Fatimah, their sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn, in addition to the Prophet himself. Some of them also include *Imāms* (from the lineage of al-Hasan and al-Husayn) in the definition. On the other hand, many Sunni scholars believe that it refers to *ahl al-kisā'* as well as the wives of the Prophet.

Some of them include their descendants as well, some even also include the families of the Prophet's relatives, such as 'Aqil, Ja'far and 'Abbas, as well as their descendants, while a few of them just include the Prophet's wives (usually in addition to the Prophet himself).

Even though both al-Tabataba'í and al-Shanqiti agree upon the significance and benefits of interpreting the Quran with the Quran and their commentaries are in many cases complementary, their discussions on what the term *ahl al-bayt* (literally: People of the House) mentioned in al-Aḥzāb [33]: 33 implies to some extent might have shown both their preference over an objectivist interpretive approach and their theological partiality at the same time.

Al-Tabataba'í starts with an argument that basically the term could not exclusively comprise the wives of the Prophet Muhammad to finally conclude that the term mentioned in the verse could have definitely been meant to just include five persons: the Prophet himself, his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali, his daughter Fatimah, and his grandsons al-Hasan and al-Husayn – and none of his wives. Meanwhile, al-Shanqiti starts with an argument against those who see that the term *ahl al-bayt* under discussion does not include the wives of the Prophet Muhammad to finally conclude that it is incorrect to say that the term excludes the Prophet's wives as much as to say that it only includes these wives.

It is noticeable that what becomes al-Shanqiti's starting point is what becomes al-Tabataba'í's ending point – which is also a conclusion made by most of Shī'i scholars, such as 'Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, al-Tusi in *al-Tibyān*, al-Tabarsi in *Majma' al-Bayān*, al-Fayd al-Kashani in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, including Zaydi exegetes like Furat al-Kufi, al-Habari, and al-A'qam in their respective tafsirs. On the other hand, what becomes al-Tabataba'í's starting point is part of what becomes al-Shanqiti's ending point – which is also a position of some Sunni scholars, such as al-

Maturidi in *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*, Abu Hayyan in *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīt*, Ibn Kathir in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, al-Tha'alabi in *al-Jawāhir al-Ḥisān*, Ibn 'Adil in *al-Lubāb*, and al-Qasimi in *Maḥāsīn al-Ta'wīl*, a stance clearer than that of most of Sunni exegetes who mostly just mention the differences (among the Sahabah or later generations) in defining the scope of *ahl al-bayt*, like al-Tabari in *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, al-Tabrani in *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, al-Tha'alabi in *al-Kashf wa al-Bayān*, al-Mawardi in *al-Nukat wa al-'Uyūn*, al-Baghawi in *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl*, Ibn 'Atiyah in *al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, Ibn al-Jawzi in *Zād al-Masīr*, and al-Suyuti in *al-Durr al-Manthūr*. Most of Sunni tafsirs cite three to four different views regarding the scope of *ahl al-bayt*: 1) that it just consists of the Prophet and the household of 'Ali (*ahl al-kisā'*), 2) that it just consists of the Prophet and his wives, 3) that it comprises both groups, and 4) that it also includes other families from Banū Muṭṭalib, in addition to the previous two groups.

For al-Shanqīti, the fact that the verses before and after the verse where the term is mentioned (al-Aḥzāb [33]: 28-32, 34), as well as the beginning of the verse itself (al-Aḥzāb [33]: 33), undoubtedly address the Prophet's wives is a clear indication (*qarīnah*) that they are – at least – part of *ahl al-bayt* cited in the end of the verse – though it could include other individuals as well, as it is clear from so many hadiths that 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan and al-Husayn are called *ahl al-bayt*. Al-Shanqīti's attention to the surrounding verses regarded as a relevant context in which *ahl al-bayt* should be understood, is consistent with the principle of interpreting the Quran with the Quran he would like to employ.

Al-Tabataba'ī is aware of such an argument focused on *siyāq* (the context of discourse). Nonetheless, by demonstrating a rational analysis on the content of the last part of the verse, *innamā yurīdu Allāh liyudhhiba 'ankum al-rijs ahl al-bayt wa yuṭahhirakum taḥīran*, and the

content of the preceding verses (as well as the beginning of the verse 33), a typical way of *tadabbur* in his tafsir, and asserting that all traditions related to *sabab nuzūl* of the last part of the verse do not mention neither its surrounding verses nor its preceding part, so it might be assumed that this part must have been revealed to the Prophet independently, he seeks to convince his readers that the term *ahl al-bayt* in the last part of the verse is not related to the Prophet's wives. The term under discussion, according to al-Tabataba'i, could not be understood as exclusively implying the Prophet's wives, nor encompassing the Prophet and his wives, nor both the five members of *ahl al-kisā'* and his wives. If the term is understood as merely comprising the Prophet's wives, the use of *'ankum*, which is a masculine plural pronoun, to refer to *ahl al-bayt* in the verse that already uses *kunna*, a feminine plural pronoun, in its beginning to address the Prophet's wives, and the availability of *riwāyāt* that explain otherwise (that *ahl al-bayt* means family members or relatives other than the Prophet's wives), might be adequate reasons to reject such an interpretation. Meanwhile, if the term is understood as encompassing the Prophet's wives and others, there might be a bit contradiction in meaning one can find with deeper contemplation. The commandments of the verses given to the wives seem to contradict the protectedness implied in the purification verse.

While al-Tabataba'i focuses on examining logical consequences of understanding *ahl al-bayt* as solely consisting of the Prophet's wives or consisting of them and others, al-Shanqiti focuses on the plausibility of the use of the term to mean – partly or exclusively – wives, both in the Quran and in general Arabic usage more broadly. That wives are categorized in what so-called *ahl al-bayt*, al-Shanqiti argues, is confirmed by another verse mentioning the word *ahl al-bayt*, i.e. Hūd [11]: 73 which uses the word to refer to the wife of Ibrahim, Sara. This connec-

tion between the only Quranic verses mentioning the word – i.e. al-Aḥzāb [33]: 33 and Hūd [11]: 73 – is, however, absent in al-Tabataba'í's analysis. Al-Shanqiti further argues that it is common in Arabic that (even) "a wife" is termed *ahl* and thereby referred to with a masculine plural pronoun. This is also affirmed by some Quranic verses, for instance Ṭāhā [20]: 10 and al-Naml [27]: 7 which refer to the wife of Musa. Again, these intra-Quranic linguistic connections are absent in al-Tabataba'í's analysis.

Nonetheless, al-Tabataba'í supports his argument on the "independency" of the second part of the verse from the first part and earlier verses with implying that this is something we can find in other parts of the Quran. For him, the relationship between the second part (*innamā yurīdu Allāh...*) and the first part (*waqarna fi buyūtikunna ...*) is just like that between a part in the middle of al-Mā'idah [5]: 3 (*al-yawm ya'isa alladhīna kafarū ...*) and its beginning part (*ḥurrimat 'alaykum al-maytah ...*). It seems that he seeks to imply that there is nothing strange in the shift of addressee in the Quran – an argument one can also find in al-Tabarsi's discussion of the purification verse in *Majma' al-Bayān*.

Al-Tabataba'í's argument ultimately relies very much upon *riwāyāt* – an approach that in his methodology should be used, rather secondary, to support understanding derived from *tadabbur* and *istinṭāq*. It is mainly based on the availability of many *riwāyāt*s that exclusively mention 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan and al-Husayn as the Prophet's *ahl bayt*, and make no mention of his wives (and even some *riwāyāt*s clearly imply that none of the wives of the Prophet is part of *ahl al-bayt*), that al-Tabataba'í rejects the view that *ahl al-bayt* also includes the wives, and accepts the view that it comprises only the five persons of *ahl al-kisā'*.

On the other hand, al-Shanqiti stresses the fact that among these many *riwāyāt*s, there are a number of *riwāyāt*s which imply that the

wives of the Prophet were included in *ahl al-bayt*. This might strengthen the argument that to include the Prophet's wives in the definition is defensible. However, al-Shanqiti brings no discussion on the fact that there are more *riwāyāt* state otherwise, which al-Tabataba'ī uses to support his opposing argument.

### **Concluding remarks**

Let the Quran speak generally means making links between its parts. In this case, interpreters would very much pay attention to perceived intra-Quranic connections. These connections can be found in many Quranic commentaries, particularly by those relying on the importance of a methodology of interpreting the Quran by the Quran. There are many common connections, at least mutually complementary, in those tafsirs, even among tafsirs across sectarian lines, as we have seen its instances in al-Shanqiti's and al-Tabataba'ī's tafsirs. However, there are a number of areas where interpreters of the Quran seem to be compelled to be apart.

First, the understanding of intra-Quranic connections. When different interpreters discover the same intra-Quranic connections, they might differ in understanding those connections. Even though both agree on the connectedness between al-Fātiḥah [1]: 7 and al-Nisā' [4]: 69 for instance, how al-Tabataba'ī and al-Shanqiti understand these connected verses seem to be in part shaped by their theological affiliation so each find in the verses a legitimacy of their respective sectarian belief.

Second, the connectedness of some verses in order. Interpreters might possibly differ in understanding the connectedness – and disconnectedness – between a verse or a part of a verse with its neighbouring verses. This difference might also be sometimes influenced by their theological belief. As we have seen, al-Shanqiti and al-Tabataba'ī dis-

agree on the interrelatedness between "the verse of purification" and the verses nearby.

Third, the choice to connect – or not to connect – a Quranic word, phrase or verse being interpreted to remote parts of the Quran. This choice could possibly sometimes be dictated by theological preference. As discussed above, al-Shanqiti connects the purification verse to the other verse mentioning the word *ahl al-bayt*, while al-Tabataba'i does not. This also contributes to how each differently interprets the word.

Fourth, the choice on to which parts of the Quran one relates a Quranic word, phrase or verse and on what context the relationship is built. This choice could possibly sometimes shaped by theological inclination as well. While al-Shanqiti chooses to take Hūd [11]: 73, Ṭāhā [20]: 10 and al-Naml [27]: 7 into account when discussing al-Aḥzāb [33]: 33 to justify that the Quran uses the word *ahl* and *ahl al-bayt* to refer to a Prophet's wife and to clarify the Arabic grammar in the verse, al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī brings al-Mā'idah [5]: 3 into discussion to explain the disconnectedness of the second part of al-Aḥzāb [33]: 33 from nearby verses.

Fifth, the decision to rely upon sound *riwāyāt* to clarify the exact meaning of a Quranic word, phrase or verse while interpreting the Quran based on the Quran itself. This decision could possibly be directed by theological preference. While al-Shanqiti is more inclined to sufficiently rely upon the Quran to hold that the Prophet's wives were included in *ahl al-bayt* and rely upon *riwāyāt* to hold that *ahl al-bayt* also comprised the household of 'Ali, al-Tabataba'i seems to much rely on *riwāyāt* to embrace a view that *ahl al-bayt* mentioned in the purification verse is intended to specifically refer to the five personalities constituting *ahl al-kisā'*.

With these areas, any attempt to arrive at objective meaning of the Quranic text might become harder and harder – if it is considered possible, and any claim of the superiority of *tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi al-Qur’ān* might have to be accepted with a great caution. Nevertheless, despite its potential to be contested by Muslims, this most acclaimed method of tafsir could possibly provide a common ground to dialog Muslim differences as long as any theological bias is acknowledged and minimized. Also, the fact that any theological partiality could creep into how this method is applied, needs not to make us fail to remember that there are many not theologically-debated verses in the Quran.

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