

The Authority of the Qur'anic Text between Imami Interpretation and Modernist Criticism: An Analytical Study in Light of the Theses of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

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Abstract: This study explores the concept of "textual authority" through an interpretive comparison between two distinct approaches in Islamic thought: the traditional Imami (Shi'i) methodology, which bases the understanding of the Qur'an on the infallible authority of the Prophet's family (Ahl al-Bayt), and the modern hermeneutic approach represented by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who views the text as a cultural product shaped by its historical and social context, with the reader playing a central role in constructing its meaning. The research is structured around four main sections: the epistemological basis of Imami interpretation, the concept of textual authority in the Imami school, Abu Zayd's thesis on the historicity of the text and the reader's role, and finally a comparative analysis. The study concludes with a balanced critical evaluation, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each approach, and proposes the possibility of a reconciliatory interpretive dialogue that preserves the sanctity of the text while engaging with modern methodologies.

Keywords: Textual Authority, Imami Tafsir, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Hermeneutics, Historicism, Interpretation, Religious Authority, Reader.

Introduction:

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon the most honorable of prophets and messengers, Muhammad, the Truthful and Trustworthy, and upon his family and chosen companions.

And then...

In Islamic thought, the Qur'anic text represents a fundamental foundation in shaping religious and cognitive awareness. It has remained a focus of interest for scholars and thinkers of various approaches and schools of thought. With the development of interpretive studies and the expansion of contemporary intellectual approaches, the concept of "textual authority" has emerged as a problematic approach where religious and cognitive intersect, and heritage and criticism intersect.

Discussions of the "textual authority" are no longer limited to the classical religious debate over authority and transmission; rather, they have become a central theme in modern studies that seek to question the relationship between text, authority, interpretation, and reality.

In the Imami context, interpretation constituted a solid tool for understanding the Qur'anic text, as it was linked to the authority of the "infallible imam" as the spokesperson for revelation and the guarantor of its understanding. Thus, the authority of the text became inseparable from the authority of the imam. Meanwhile, modern critical movements, such as the theses of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, have

tended to deconstruct the notion of the fixed authority of the text and to discuss the text as a cultural product, subject to the history of understanding and the changing factors of interpretation.

Research Problem

In light of this fundamental divergence, this research poses the following problem:

Is the authority of the Qur'anic text an intrinsic authority stemming from its absolute sanctity, or is it an acquired authority shaped by interpretation and exegesis?

How is this authority distributed between the text, the interpreter, and the reader?

Is it possible to speak of a variable authority of the text in modernist thought, as opposed to the closed and fixed authority of Imami interpretation?

Research Objectives

The research seeks to achieve a set of objectives, namely:

1. Explain the concept of "textual authority" in classical and contemporary Islamic thought, and define its cognitive and religious dimensions.
2. Analyze the nature of interpretive authority in the Imami approach, and clarify its relationship to the doctrinal concepts associated with Imamate and infallibility.
3. Study Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's critical thesis on religious texts, and deconstruct his vision of the relationship between text and meaning.
4. Conduct a systematic comparison between the Imami approach and the modernist approach, in terms of premises, results, and limits of interpretation, with the aim of arriving at a balanced reading that highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a comparative analytical approach, examining the Qur'anic text in light of two different approaches: the first, which belongs to the Imami interpretive heritage, which is based on narration and the authority of the infallible Imam; and the second, which belongs to modernist critical thought as formulated by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, which is largely influenced by Western hermeneutics and theories of interpretation.

The researcher will rely on reading original texts from both perspectives and analyzing them according to a balanced critical perspective, while fully adhering to the scientific method, ensuring academic integrity, and avoiding any ideological projection or selective application.

Research Limits

This research recognizes that the topic of "textual authority" is complex and broad. Therefore, the scope of the study has been limited to specific boundaries, including:

- Limiting the study to the Twelver Imami school without expanding into other interpretive schools.
- Focusing on a specific model in modernist thought, namely Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, as one of the most prominent figures who raised the issue of authority and interpretation from within the Islamic field.
- Limiting the analysis to selected interpretive models, such as Tafsir al-Mizan and Tafsir al-Amthal, without delving into the generality of Imami interpretations.
- Avoiding detailed discussion of Western post-structuralist trends, except to the extent that it serves the comparison and demonstrates their influence on Abu Zayd's theses.

Chapter One

The Authority of the Qur'anic Text - The Concept and Its Dimensions

The concept of textual authority constitutes an essential entry point for understanding the nature of the relationship between the Qur'anic text and its interpreter, on the one hand, and between the text and the reality of reception and interpretation, on the other. The importance of this concept increases in light of the discrepancy between traditional interpretive schools and modern critical approaches that have reconsidered the text's position within the system of religious understanding. Since its revelation, the Qur'anic text has held a central position in shaping Muslim religious, intellectual, and cultural consciousness, as the highest source of legislation and guidance. However, this centrality has not prevented differing perceptions of the nature of its authority: Does this authority stem from the text itself, with its sanctity and miraculous nature? Or is it an acquired authority, formed in light of interpretation, understanding, and the interpreter's authority? [1]

This study attempts to pave the way for a comparative study between Imami interpretation and modernist criticism, by examining the theoretical, linguistic, and philosophical foundations of the concept of "textual authority." It first examines its definition and analysis, then reviews its development in Islamic thought, and finally discusses the central problem linking sovereignty and interpretation. Thus, this study paves the way for understanding the theoretical foundation upon which each school (Imami and modernist) builds its vision of the authority of the Qur'anic text, the limits of this authority, and its impact on guiding religious understanding.

The first requirement: defining the authority of the text

The concept of "textual authority" constitutes one of the major conceptual keys in both religious and philosophical thought. It is a complex concept in which the lexical and the cultural intersect, the linguistic and the authoritative, and the textual and the interpretive, making it incapable of simple definition or semantic reduction.[2]

First: The linguistic and technical meaning of authority

In Arabic, the word "authority" is derived from the root (salata), which denotes subjugation, empowerment, and control. Lisan al-Arab states that "authority is proof and evidence, and also refers to the force used to enforce an order or prohibition." The word has evolved semantically to mean power or the ability to impose an opinion, decision, or system, whether materially or morally.[3]

In terminology, "authority" appears in dictionaries of political and social thought to mean "the granted or acquired ability that allows a particular party to direct or control the behavior of others within an institutional or cognitive context." It takes many forms: state authority, paternal authority, authority of the authority of the authority, the authority of the law, and even the authority of the text. When authority is associated with the text, the intended meaning is not merely documented speech, but rather as an entity bearing meaning, a reference to which one can resort, which may transcend the reader and interpreter, and which sets the conditions for understanding or interpretation. Here, authority appears as "a state of cognitive or symbolic dominance exercised by the text over understanding or the discourse formed around it."

Second: The emergence of the concept of "the authority of the text" in religious and philosophical thought.

The concept of "textual authority" has been evident in religious and cultural contexts since ancient times. Sacred texts have always been associated with "founding texts" that exercise a kind of absolute authority over belief and behavior, establishing themselves as the sole source of truth. The foundational texts in the Abrahamic religions—most notably the Holy Quran in Islam—represented the center of supreme authority that regulates the relationship between man and God, between man and society, and sometimes even between man and himself.

In modern Western philosophy, the concept of textual authority has developed within critical contexts and has become particularly prominent with the transformations that Western thought has witnessed

since the second half of the twentieth century, when the relationship between text and reader, text and author, and text and context was reconsidered.[4]

A. (Michel Foucault)

Foucault addressed the concept of power in multiple contexts, but he linked it to discourse and knowledge. He emphasized that power is exercised not only through institutions, but also through texts and discourses that produce and reproduce knowledge. In this context, the text becomes a carrier of "discursive" power that exerts a kind of cognitive and behavioral control over the recipient. Thus, the text is not innocent; rather, it is a power structure. [5]

B. (Paul Ricoeur)

Ricoeur was preoccupied with the idea of hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation, and emphasized that the text, after separating itself from its author, becomes an independent entity, carrying meaning but not imposing it definitively. While Ricoeur acknowledges the text's ability to guide the reader, he believes that meaning is not extracted from the text mechanically, but rather through an ongoing interpretive debate between the horizon of the text and that of the reader. This means that the "authority of the text" is not absolute, but rather relative and negotiable within the space of reading.[6]

C. (Jacques Derrida)

Derrida went further in his critique of traditional concepts of power, calling for the deconstruction of the text as structurally incoherent, lacking a single or definitive meaning. Rather, it is an open space for multiple interpretations and readings. Thus, for Derrida, the "authority of the text" is illusory or delusional, because it assumes the existence of a fixed center of meaning, whereas the truth is that the text is fluid, and the intensity of its authority does not imply its stability, but rather the multiplicity of its levels and the possibility of its interpretation.

The second requirement: The development of the concept of authority in Islamic thought

The issue of "textual authority" is a fundamental issue that has shaped the trajectory of Islamic interpretive and theological thought for centuries. Muslims have interacted with the Qur'anic text not as a mere religious discourse, but rather as a unique source of epistemological, legislative, and spiritual authority. Scholars and commentators have varied in their interpretations of the position of this authority: Does it stem from the text itself, as the word of God? Or is it formed in light of human interpretation and understanding? Or is there an insurmountable overlap between the two aspects?

First: Is the authority of the text derived from its sanctity or from the authority of interpretation?

The traditional conception of the authority of the Qur'anic text in Islamic jurisprudence and theology is based on the principle of intrinsic sanctity, derived from its being the miraculous word of God, to whom falsehood cannot approach from before or behind. In this understanding, authority is neither acquired nor relative, but rather fixed and intrinsic. Thus, the text is the highest reference and a transcendent authority that cannot be subjected to the standards of human interpretation except within the limits permitted by the principles of Islamic understanding (such as language, context, and context). However, this conception was insufficient to explain the diversity of interpretive approaches and the disagreement among jurists and commentators regarding the meanings of the Qur'anic text. From an early period, voices emerged—some within the Islamic rationalist tradition, such as the Mu'tazila, and others later within Imami Shi'a thought—that argued that the authority of the text is inseparable from the authority of interpretation. They argued that understanding the text is not automatic or objective, but rather through cognitive and doctrinal means, which may take the form of an infallible imam, human ijtihad, or the accumulation of interpretive knowledge. [7]

Thus, a governing duality began to crystallize in the view of the authority of the text:

- A view that considers the text to possess absolute, intrinsic authority emanating from its divine source.

- Another view that the authority of the text is only revealed through the act of interpretation. That is, authority is constructed in the relationship between the text and the reader or interpreting authority, which allows for multiple understandings and meanings.

This tension between subjectivity and interpretation has remained present in Islamic thought and has never been definitively resolved. Rather, it has remained open to a range of jurisprudential, theological, and philosophical debates. Its forms have even been renewed in the modern era with the emergence of modernist thought.

Second: The triangular relationship between the text, the reader, and the interpreter

One of the most prominent features of the development of Islamic thought on the authority of the text is the shift from a binary view (text/reader) To a three-pronged vision that includes: [8]

1. The text itself, as the bearer of divine meaning.
2. The reader who receives the text and reconstructs its meaning in light of his needs and its historical and cognitive context.
3. The interpreter or authority, as an epistemological or doctrinal mediator, possesses the tools of interpretation and the authority to understand the text and determine its meaning.

In Imami thought, this relationship took a special form, as it was codified within a doctrinal system that made the infallible Imam the sole legitimate reader of the text. This means that the meaning of the text can only be extracted through this "parallel text" or "the speaking Qur'an," in the Imami expression. The interpreter here is not merely a jurist or linguist; rather, he is the guarantor of the meaning by virtue of his infallibility and his representation of revelation. In Sunni schools, the relationship between text and interpreter developed in a more open manner. The role of the mujtahid was expanded within the framework of the principles of jurisprudence, and multiple opinions and interpretations were permitted. The authority of the text remained recognized, but not as absolute, but rather as restricted by the tools of jurisprudence and linguistics. With the development of later Islamic thought, particularly in the modern era, the reader's position began to assume a greater role in this triangular relationship. Instead of the recipient being entirely subject to the authority of the text or reference, they began to be viewed as an interpretive agent with a stake in shaping meaning. This was particularly true in the trends of religious reform and contemporary rational interpretation. This culminated in the propositions of modernist thinkers, such as Abu Zayd, who called for shifting the center of authority from the text or reference to the reader themselves. [9]

The third requirement: the authority of the text between sovereignty and interpretation

The relationship between the Qur'anic text and the authority of interpretation is one of the most controversial intellectual issues in the Islamic field, as it intersects with doctrinal, jurisprudential, and methodological considerations. The fundamental question that arises here is: Is the Qur'anic text the ultimate authority in and of itself, such that it is presented as a definitive statement requiring no interpretation other than within its rhetorical limits? Or is its meaning only revealed through interpretive means, rendering interpretation an unavoidable necessity?

This research seeks to clarify the text's position within the system of authority, the limits of the reader's intervention, and the role of religious authority in establishing or reproducing meaning.

First: Is the text the final reference, or is meaning formed through interpretation?

In the traditional Islamic view, the Qur'anic text is viewed as the primary and final source of religious knowledge and legislation. It is characterized by certainty and conviction, and contains "absolute truth" as the revealed word of God. Therefore, the text possesses an "original" authority that imposes itself on the reader and constitutes a final, irrefutable reference. Despite this centrality, the historical interpretive reality bears witness to a diversity of readings, multiple understandings, and even the divergence of scholars' interpretations of a single verse. This diversity reveals the fact that meaning does not emerge directly from the text, but is formed through a complex interpretive process influenced by the doctrinal, linguistic, cultural, and temporal context. The text does not speak for

itself; rather, it is read and understood through a human intermediary: the interpreter, the mujtahid, or the reader, who intervenes—by virtue of their background and tools—in constructing meaning. Here, the "authority of interpretation" begins to challenge the "authority of the text," transforming the relationship from the centrality of the text into a dialectic between the text and understanding. [10]

Second: The concept of Quranic sovereignty and the limits of the reader's intervention

Based on the Qur'anic concept itself, the text has the status of sovereignty, as in the Almighty's saying:

{Sovereignty belongs only to Allah} (Yusuf: 40) This led Islamic thinkers to adopt the principle of "the sovereignty of Sharia" or "the sovereignty of the text" as the basis for the epistemological, religious, and political system.

However, sovereignty here does not merely mean political authority; rather, it means that the text is the ruler in the arena of meaning, value, and legislation. However, this sovereignty is not exercised automatically; rather, it requires interpretation and explanation, which opens the door to a fundamental question: What are the limits of the reader's intervention under the sovereignty of the text?

Some trends believe that the reader has no real authority, but is merely a transmitter or revealer of a meaning already present in the text. This view prevails in textual or fundamentalist movements. Others, however—particularly in rationalist or purposive readings—believe that the reader possesses a legitimate interpretive margin, through which he or she can reread the text in light of developments of time and place, without overstepping its bounds. The question remains: Is the reader's intervention conditional and limited? Or is he or she a partner in the production of meaning?

Here, the tension crystallizes between the absolute sovereignty of the text and the interpretive agency of the reader, revealing that the relationship between the two parties is not static, but rather dynamic, subject to both interpretation and control. [11]

Third: Religious authority and its role in producing or establishing meaning.

Religious authority plays a pivotal role in regulating the relationship between text and interpretation, whether in the Imami or Sunni context. In the Twelver Imami school, authority is assigned to the infallible Imam or his representative among the jurists, who are considered the only ones authorized to understand the correct meaning of the text. Thus, the authority of the text is combined with the authority of the reference, such that the text can only be understood through its interpretation. This doctrinal connection between the text and the reference renders the authority of meaning closed or protected, leaving no room for interpretation for the ordinary reader, but rather confining understanding within a predetermined framework. Hence, the concept of the "speaking Quran" in Imami jurisprudence, where the Imam is the one who articulates the true meaning.

In other schools, despite the absence of the concept of "infallibility," authority remains present through scholars and jurists who establish the fundamental and linguistic rules that govern interpretation. Thus, the Qur'anic meaning—even if it appears theoretically open—is constantly being reproduced through a cognitive and religious reference, which may have multiple names but which performs the function of establishing the meaning and determining what is acceptable and what is not.[12]

Thus, the authority exercises dual power:

1. An interpretive authority based on the tools of interpretation.
2. A socio-religious authority that imposes meaning within the community of believers.

Section Two

Imami Interpretation and the Authority of the Text

The first requirement: Introduction to Imami interpretation

The interpretation of the Quran by the Twelver Imams is based on the belief in the infallible Imam as the epistemological basis for understanding the Quran. It is believed that the infallible Imams of the

Ahl al-Bayt are the heirs of the Prophet's knowledge, and that God has granted them divine infallibility, enabling them to explain the meanings of the Quran in an infallible manner. The Imami tradition describes the Imam as the "speaking Quran" in contrast to the "silent Quran." This concept is attributed to Imam Ali (peace be upon him), who said: "This is the silent Book of God, and I am the speaking Book of God." The meaning of this statement is that the Quranic text is silent by nature, meaning it is susceptible to multiple meanings and interpretations, and requires someone to articulate its true meanings and explain them to people. This makes the infallible Imam a living source for understanding the Quran, as he embodies its teachings in words and actions. [13]

The concept of the "speaking Quran" is linked to the concept of infallibility, which guarantees the Imam a complete understanding of the Quran, free from error or deviant interpretation. Imami scholars assert that the Imam has attained a level of faith and knowledge that enables him to fully comprehend the contents of the revelation, both outwardly and inwardly. Scholar Muhammad Jawad Mughniyah has pointed out that the true meanings of the Quran can only be grasped by the true believer, whose flesh and blood are intertwined with faith. He cites Imam Ali's saying: "That is the silent Quran, and I am the speaking Quran." Based on this view, the Imams' statements and interpretations are an objective extension of the Quranic text, not in the form of interpretation based on personal opinion, but rather in the form of revelation of the hidden meanings by God's permission. From this perspective, the Quran can only be fully understood, according to the Imamiyyah, by referring to the reports of the infallible ones, whom the Prophet (peace be upon him) designated as companions of the Book in the famous Hadith of the Two Weighty Things, agreed upon by Muslims.[14]

The second requirement: the authority of the text in the Imami view

The Imamiyyah believes that the authority to interpret the Quranic text does not emanate from the text itself in a completely independent manner, but rather is formed by relying on the words of the infallible one who possesses complete knowledge of the Book. The question is: Can the Quran be understood by those who contemplate it, or does it require an infallible interpreter to uncover its meanings? The Imami approach answers that the Quran has exoteric and esoteric levels. The general public can understand a portion of its exoteric meaning, but its profound interpretation and inner truth can only be truly understood by those directly addressed by it—namely, the Prophet and his infallible family. A definitive statement has been narrated from the Imams: "Only those addressed by it know the Quran," indicating that complete knowledge of the meanings of the Book is preserved with the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Imams (peace be upon them). Imami scholars require Muslims to believe in both the exoteric and esoteric meanings of the Quran, provided that the esoteric meaning is understood exclusively through the family of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Anyone who denies the existence of esoteric meanings or rejects the interpretations of verses provided by the Imams is considered by them to have denied a part of the revelation. Some scholars hold that it is impermissible to reject any esoteric interpretation attributed to an infallible person, even if the mind does not fully comprehend its meaning, just as it is impermissible to reject the apparent meaning of the Quran or its definitive parts. Thus, the authority to understand the text becomes a combination of the text itself and the infallible person's explanation of it; neither can be dispensed with within the Imami epistemology. [15]

The relationship between interpretation and leadership in producing meaning is complementary, ensuring that the correct meaning is derived without deviation. For Shiites, leadership is not merely a political or spiritual leadership, but rather a scholarly and interpretive authority for the text. The Imamis believe that the Imams inherited knowledge of the Book at all levels from the Prophet, citing the Hadith of the Two Weighty Things, which emphasizes the inseparability of the Quran and the Prophet's family. Based on this, they based their interpretive approach on the obligation to refer to the narrations of the Prophet and his family when interpreting verses. Early Imami commentaries – such as Tafsir al-Qummi and Tafsir al-Ayyashi – were filled with hadiths narrated from the Imams that explained the verses, to the point that some commentators would not interpret a verse if they did not find a trace narrated from the infallible one. An example of this is Tafsir al-Burhan by Sayyid Hashim al-Bahrani, who was content with collecting narrations without personal interpretation. Rather, he

would refrain from commenting in the absence of a transmitted text. This tendency reflects the Imami belief that the Qur'an needs an infallible interpreter to ensure its correct understanding. The text on its own may be interpreted in different ways, while the Imam's statement is conclusive and reliable. [16] This approach does not negate the role of reason or language in interpretation. Rather, it employs them within a specific framework defined by the infallibles. The imams urged interpretation of the Quran by the Quran, and not to rely on the literal meaning of its apparent meaning if the text provides explanation and clarification. They also encouraged the use of rational proof, provided it is consistent with the text and does not conflict with the infallible authority. In the Imami approach, reason and transmission constitute two complementary wings: infallible transmission guides the mind and controls its conclusions, while sound reason helps comprehend the connotations of the text and grasp its wisdom. Here, the concept of the authority of the text emerges in the Imami view as a dual authority: on the one hand, the apparent linguistic significance of the verses, and on the other, the imams' infallible interpretation and exegesis. For the Imamis, the Qur'an is an authority in and of itself, but its practical authority can only be dispelled through the Imam's statement, which reveals its intent and removes any ambiguity. The Imami school guarantees what it calls "the production of meaning" within the framework of a unified scientific frame of reference, protecting interpretation from dispersion and whims, while opening the way for independent reasoning governed by reason and the text. [17]

The third requirement: practical models of Imami interpretations

To understand the Imami approach practically, we will review examples of the most prominent contemporary Imami interpretations:

(1) Tafsir al-Mizan - Allamah Tabataba'i

Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Quran is one of the most important Imami tafsirs of the twentieth century, representing a qualitative shift in the methodology of Imami tafsir. Tabataba'i adopted the approach of interpreting the Quran by the Quran, relying on reliable hadiths and narrations, within strict scientific controls. In the introduction to his tafsir, he explains that he relies only on authentic chains of transmission from the Prophet or his family, rejecting any transmissions from the Companions or Successors if they do not meet the conditions of authenticity. He then adds a methodological duality by classifying two branches: "Bayan" (linguistic analytical explanation) and "Narrative Research" (presentation and discussion of narrations). This balanced approach enables him to combine objective analysis with Imami transmission. His methodology is evident in his treatment of verses on imamate, such as "Indeed, I will make you a leader for mankind," where he explains that imamate is a lofty status distinct from prophethood, encompassing a special formative guidance. [18]

(2) Al-Amthal Interpretation - Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi

Tafsir al-Amthal (The Arabic Model for Tafsir Namunah) represents a contemporary model for innovation in Imami tafsir. Published in 15 volumes by a team supervised by Sheikh Nasser Makarem Shirazi, it features an easy style suitable for both specialist and general readers, focusing on connecting people to the Quran through simplified language without complex terminology. The tafsir includes introductions to each surah, analyzes the verses verse by verse, and draws on the views of Shiite and Sunni commentators. It then presents the alternatives closest to the evidence within a thematic framework.

For example, in explaining "Indeed, those who believe..." (Al-Baqarah 62), the interpretation combines Qur'anic verses and rational proof to answer the question "Is following any divine religion sufficient for salvation?" It uses the principle "the Qur'an explains itself" and refers to "And whoever desires other than Islam..." (Al-Imran 85), which reinterprets the concepts of heaven and finality. [19]

(3) Contemporary Interpreters - Mr. Kamal Al-Haydari

Sayyid Kamal al-Haydari continued to renew Imami approaches by emphasizing the flexibility of the human mind within the frame of reference. Despite the authoritativeness of the infallible Imam's statement, he criticized rigidity if the saying "The Qur'an is only known to those addressed by it" is understood in a way that prevents rational contemplation. Al-Haydari emphasizes the importance of

separating the levels of understanding the apparent meaning of the Qur'an, which is available to every reader, from the inner level specific to the Ahl al-Bayt. Therefore, his concern is to keep the door open to ijтиhad, guided by both transmission and reason. [20]

The fourth requirement: a critical analytical reading

The Imami interpretation methodology has raised several issues regarding the role of the reader and the authority of interpretation under the dominance of the infallible authority. Among these issues are:

1. Restrictions on individual ijтиhad

Imami interpretation is accused of limiting the role of the ordinary reader, as their appearance as an interpreter remains confined to the framework of what was reported from the Imams. Adhering to what they said could turn them into promoters of ready-made interpretations, rather than an informed reader. In this regard, the Imami approach is likened to "interpretive clericalism," resembling what the Church did in the Middle Ages when it monopolized the understanding of the Bible in the hands of clergy.

2. Al-Dhahabi's Criticism of Imami Interpretation

Muhammad Hussein al-Dhahabi believes that Imami interpretation violates the "intellectual freedom of the reader," by requiring adherence to the esoteric interpretation of the Imams and prohibiting the free exercise of reason that conflicts with these narrations. This, in his view, represents a practical abolition of the role of the Qur'anic text in readers' understanding.

3. The Imami Response: The Regulating Balance

On the other hand, Imami scholars argue that this approach does not imply the suspension of reason or the prevention of contemplation, but rather represents a mechanism for regulating and framing it. Verses such as "And We revealed to you the message that you may make clear to the people" indicate that the task of explanation is entrusted to the infallible, and that it is not for anyone to interpret the text as they wish. Thus, the reader is required to research and contemplate, but he must accept the response of God's narrations in whatever they find, which creates a balance between the two, without losing the letter or slipping into opinion.

4. Signs of Ijтиhad within the Reference Framework

The intervention of disciplined ijтиhad is evident in the production of modern interpretations such as al-Mizan and al-Amthal, where a type of profound ijтиhad emerged in analyzing texts according to the framework of Islamic law and transmitting scholarly narrations, without swerving from the frame of reference. Tabataba'i, for example, developed objective readings and did not rely solely on uncritical narrations. This demonstrates that the Imami approach cautiously keeps the door to ijтиhad open within the constraints of transmission and reason.

5. How is the authority of interpretation distributed?

In the Imami view, the matter is distributed as follows:[21]

- The Qur'an: The original authority.
- The Infallible Imam: The infallible interpretive authority (the speaking text).
- Contemporary religious authorities: They assume the character of implementation and application during the occultation, without imitating infallibility, but rather relying on a controlling epistemological approach.

6. Imamate and Ijтиhad after the Occultation

With the occultation of the Awaited Imam, ijтиhad was not abolished, but rather reshaped within the framework of authorities. Today's mujtahids are capable of interpreting the Qur'an, provided they follow the legal methodology. This development proves that the Imami approach does not close horizons, but rather protects them from deviation.

Critical Summary

Point	Advantages	Disadvantages
Interpretation Control	Protecting the text from deviation and setting clear boundaries for understanding	Restricting individual interpretation
Rational-Traditional Reference	Balance between reason and narrative	Possibility of rigidity in understanding a literal interpretation
Renewal Within the Framework	Emergence of modern, encyclopedic interpretations	Needing to refer to narratives to justify a new reading
Ijtihad in Occultation	Continued ijtihad within a framework of authority	Unfortunately, the diversity of interpretations can create differences

Chapter Three

The Authority of the Text in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Thought – Comparison and Analysis

The first requirement: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's thesis on the authority of the text

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd argues that religious texts—primarily the Qur'an—are not an entity separate from reality or outside of time and place. Rather, they are a cultural product formed within the historical, social, and cultural context in which they were revealed. The text is the fruit of a dialectical interaction between divine discourse and the context of Arab society in the seventh century AD, with its attendant transformations, conflicts, systems, and values. According to Abu Zayd, attempting to understand the text as "apart from history" leads to its isolation from the dynamics of life and its confinement to metaphysical frameworks that do not serve its contemporary understanding.[22]

Abu Zayd argues that the Qur'an was not revealed all at once as a ready-made text, complete in meaning. Rather, it was shaped over more than twenty years, as Islamic reality evolved and its cognitive and legislative needs grew. Hence, viewing the text as a "fixed and context-free" essence does not reflect its truth. Rather, he argues, it hinders the possibility of a scientific and objective understanding of it. Moreover, he argues that the preconceived belief in the existence of a "prehistoric text"—that is, a text complete before its revelation—obscures the dialectical and humanistic nature of its composition, producing readings that perpetuate authority and prevent renewal.

In light of this, Abu Zayd asserts that every text, even sacred texts, is a linguistic text, meaning that it is subject to the characteristics of the Arabic language in which it was composed and to the social contexts that produced it or interacted with it. Hence, understanding a text is not only achieved through the appearance of its words, but also through understanding the circumstances of its production and its historical and cognitive contexts. From this standpoint, a contemporary reading of the text becomes a necessity, because its meanings are not static or final, but rather dynamic, capable of being renewed according to the change in the reader's historical horizon. In this sense,[23] Abu Zayd clearly distinguishes between text and meaning. Text is a stable linguistic structure, while meaning is a continuous production process in which interaction takes place between the text and the reader. Meaning is not extracted directly from the text, but rather is produced through an interactive relationship that includes interpretation and understanding subject to the reader's culture and cognitive conditions. The authority of the text lies not only in its structure, but also in how it is received and interpreted within new contexts. In this context, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was influenced by Western schools of interpretation, particularly the works of Paul Ricoeur and Hans Gadamer, who emphasized that one of the most important gains of interpretive thought is drawing attention to the role of the reader/interpreter in producing meaning. For him, the text is not a complete entity that carries its own meaning within itself, but rather is open to interpretation, and any attempt to impose a "single meaning" on it is an expression of ideological hegemony rather than a scientific explanation. He adds that religious texts do not have absolute authority independent of human understanding. Rather, they—like any linguistic discourse—are understood in light of linguistic analysis, cultural structure, historical

context, and the conditions of the reality in which they are read. Therefore, the reading process becomes a production of meaning, in which the reader participates fully and actively, as long as it is governed by a scientific and analytical approach.

The second requirement: An approach to historicism and hermeneutics

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was influenced by Western hermeneutical schools, particularly the philosophy of interpretation (hermeneutics) and postmodernist schools. He drew on the works of philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida, drawing on them to build his intellectual project based on the critique of religious reason and the renewal of methodologies for reading sacred texts. His writings are replete with clear references to the efforts of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Hirsch, who laid the foundations for understanding the text in light of its conditions and historical contexts. This reflects Abu Zayd's conscious openness to critical Western thought without falling into dependency.

In his book "Problems of Reading and Mechanisms of Interpretation," Abu Zayd devotes an entire chapter to presenting Western hermeneutical theories, attempting through them to establish a hermeneutic approach compatible with the Arabic-Islamic text, without falling into the trap of mere copying or mechanical projection. He called for drawing inspiration from Western analytical tools through a dialectical dialogue that takes into account the historical and religious specificity of Islamic discourse .[24]

Abu Zayd also embraced deconstruction through his reading of Derrida's works. He embraced the idea of "multiple meanings" and "interpretive uncertainty," meaning that meaning is not entirely contained within the structure of a text, but rather is always open to reshaping through reading. Hence, he believes that texts—including religious texts—do not have a monolithic, definitive meaning, but rather transform into a semantic space that is renewed with each reading. For him, texts, as linguistic phenomena, are subject to the laws of language, history, and culture, which necessitates subjecting them to modern analytical methods capable of deconstructing their structure and producing their meanings. Among the most prominent of these intellectual methods Abu Zayd adopted were the idea of "open interpretation" and the "historicity of religious discourse," meaning that texts were not above history, but rather were born from within it and interacted with its circumstances and data. In Abu Zayd's view, Quranic texts are not only divine in origin, but also human in experience and language. They were assimilated by early society according to its needs and contexts. Therefore, reading and understanding them must keep pace with evolving times and shifts in reality. He defended his historicist view of texts by arguing that linking them to their contexts does not mean stripping them of their sanctity; rather, it affirms their vitality and ability to interact with real-life problems and the renewal of human questions. According to him, it is not possible today to interpret texts with the same tools used in the early centuries, because our contemporary questions and concerns are radically different. Historicism here does not negate the text, but rather grants us the ability to repurpose it within a rational, scientific vision that is open to modern human sciences such as linguistics, semiology, and discourse analysis .[25]

Thus, it appears that Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was not merely a transmitter of Western ideas, but rather a thinker who strove to establish an epistemological bridge between Western interpretive methods and Islamic heritage, attempting to produce from this encounter a new horizon in understanding the Qur'anic text, one that does not close the door to sanctity, but does not prevent questioning the text and investigating its renewed meanings in light of successive eras.

The third requirement: a comparison between the Imami and modernist visions

In the traditional Imami view, the sacred text, particularly the Holy Quran, is an absolute and unchanging authority that does not change with time or context. The text is treated as having a single, objective meaning intended by God Almighty, accessible only through the trusted channel of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them). In Imami thought, interpretive authority is not granted to any single reader or interpreter; rather, it is restricted to the infallible Imam, as the exclusive bearer of divine knowledge. He alone is capable of

revealing the hidden meanings of the text. Interpretation by personal opinion is forbidden in the Imami approach. Prominent Imami scholars, such as Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, believe that anyone who interprets a verse independently without consulting the statements of the infallible Imams has transgressed the bounds of scholarly and religious legitimacy and fallen into the category of the rejected "interpretation by personal opinion." Al-Khoei asserts that the interpreter should refrain from expressing any opinion if he does not find an interpretive text from one of the imams, which makes reliable narration a basic condition for any interpretive effort. [26]

According to this conception, the sacred text maintains its intrinsic authority through its permanent connection to the Prophet's family, and its meanings are protected from distortion and mental manipulation. The text is sacred not only in terms of its source, but also in terms of its interpretation, as it can only be interpreted through what is transmitted from the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them). This gives the text semantic stability, prevents the relativity of interpretation, and always makes the final reference the infallible Imam, not the reader's mind or intellectual background.

In contrast, the modernist vision, as manifested in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's project, deals with the text as a linguistic entity and a cultural product conditioned by its historical context. For him, the text is not a closed, superficial given, but rather a living discourse susceptible to reinterpretation as the reader's temporal and cognitive conditions change. Abu Zayd believes that every religious text interacts with the historical reality that produced it, and that its meaning is not final, but rather subject to renewal with the emergence of new questions and intellectual problems. Abu Zayd adopted the "open horizon" theory of interpretation, drawing on Gadamer's philosophy, which asserts that understanding a text is a dialogical process, arising from the convergence of the horizons of the modern reader with those of the ancient text. Meaning is no longer a transcendent matter discovered through transmission, but rather becomes the outcome of a cognitive interaction between the interpreter and the text. Thus, the authority of interpretation shifts from the infallible imam to the qualified reader who adheres to a scientific and critical approach that allows them to unlock the mysteries of the text, without claiming to possess absolute truth.[27]

In this vision, the narrative is no longer the exclusive interpretive reference, but rather one of the reading tools alongside language, semiotic analysis, and historical context. According to this approach, religious texts cannot be understood in a contemporary way through narratives alone; rather, they must be questioned using modern tools. This means that reason and historical interpretation represent the basis for producing meaning, as opposed to the silent, literal reception that characterized some traditional schools.

The fundamental difference between the two perspectives lies in the source of interpretive authority: while the Imami school holds that meaning resides in the text and is revealed only through the Imam, the modernist reading holds that meaning is produced through the reader and their interaction with the text within its historical context. This gap is reflected in the nature of the methodology: the former relies on narrative and limits interpretation to it, while the latter relies on reason, history, and discourse analysis. Thus, the Imami interpretation tends toward precision and transmitted certainty, while the modernist interpretation tends toward pluralism, renewal, and rational effectiveness.

Fourth requirement: balanced critical evaluation

It is fair to say that both the traditional Imami and modernist hermeneutical approaches offer significant epistemological and interpretive advantages, but both face critical challenges. Regarding Imami interpretation, its most prominent feature is its control of meaning within clear reference limits. This ensures a high degree of stability and consistency in interpreting verses, preventing the descent into deviant or selective interpretations subject to personal whims or intellectual agendas. Linking interpretation to the infallible Imam—who, in Imami thought, is considered to possess complete knowledge of the Book—endows the text with a sacred dimension and enshrines its respect as a sacred divine discourse, not treated like other human texts, subject to tampering and arbitrary interpretation.

This cautious approach has preserved—as some scholars believe—the semantic unity of the religious text across the ages and the continuity of its spiritual and mystical meanings, especially when the

reading is coupled with multi-level narratives and interpretations that take into account both the apparent and hidden meanings of the text. [28] Researchers have also pointed out that the Imami interpretation, despite its relative isolation, has allowed for a comprehensive reading that takes into account the dimensions of language, tradition, and doctrinal context, rendering the text more stable and less susceptible to politicization or instrumental use. In contrast, the modernist reading—as represented by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd—has proposed a more open and rational interpretive vision, emphasizing the need to recall the historical context of the text and activating reason as a tool for understanding and analysis. According to this vision, the religious text is not a closed, superficial discourse, but rather a product of the circumstances of its revelation and the contexts of its reception. Therefore, rereading it in light of new cognitive and social developments is a necessity, not a violation of its sanctity. This vision has provided a new breakthrough in the field of contemporary Quranic studies, particularly in terms of its ability to generate new questions and approach the text from multiple angles that draw on the sciences of linguistics, semiology, and history. The promotion of critical and rational readings also constituted a qualitative step toward renewing religious thought and reconnecting it with the questions of modern man. Instead of restricting interpretation to the traditional religious elite, every qualified reader became capable of providing an understanding of the text, as long as they adhered to a disciplined scientific methodology. This allowed for the expansion of interpretive dialogue and opened the door to humanistic and universal readings that transcend sectarian isolation or the regurgitated repetition of heritage. Despite these mutual gains, the question remains: Is it truly possible to reconcile these two approaches? In reality, each stems from different epistemological and cognitive foundations. While the Imami approach is based on transmitted certainty and the exclusivity of infallible authority, the modernist approach relies on historical relativity and multiple levels of meaning.[29] This disparity makes their encounter difficult unless a theoretical effort is made to establish a reconciling approach that takes into account the sanctity of the text while simultaneously allowing for reason and historical context. Some thinkers have pointed to the possibility of reconciling the two readings by developing a complex interpretive approach that combines elements of stability and openness, thus neither denying the divine dimension of the text nor freezing meaning into closed boxes.

Such a path calls for a serious epistemological dialogue between the two approaches, with each side abandoning the exaggerated denial of the other and recognizing that the religious text is too expansive to be monopolized by a single meaning or reading. From this perspective, the multiplicity of readings—even if seemingly conflicting—may be a healthy expression of the text's dynamism and renewed richness, especially if these readings are coupled with methodology and discipline, rather than chaos and arbitrary deconstruction.[30]

Conclusion

After presenting and analyzing Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's view of the authority of the text, and comparing it with the traditional Imami view, a set of conclusions and recommendations emerge that can be built upon to activate interpretive debate in contemporary Islamic thought.

It becomes clear that each of the two approaches, the Imami and the modernist, proceeds from a different frame of reference in defining the concept of "the authority of the text." While the Imami approach bases its authority on the sanctity of the text and the authority of the infallible Imam, the modernist approach links the text to its historical context and grants the reader a fundamental role in producing meaning. This difference reflects a divergence in the fundamentalist view of concepts such as immutability, sanctity, and reason. Despite the apparent divergence, the possibility of building an epistemological dialogue between the two approaches does not seem impossible. Indeed, it can be said that the need for it has become more urgent in light of the growing intellectual and cultural challenges facing the Islamic world. This dialogue does not require the dissolution of differences or the concession of the fundamentals of faith. Rather, it is based on the principle of "multiple disciplined readings" and the necessity of distinguishing between the sanctity of the text and the "sanctity of human understanding." Achieving integration between narrative and reason, and between constancy and openness, may produce a more flexible and profound, complex interpretive approach. Among the

most prominent recommendations emerging from this research is the call to develop the tools of traditional interpretation without compromising its essence. This can be achieved through:

- Integrating modern methods (such as rhetorical, linguistic, and historical analysis) in a scientifically rigorous manner.
- Opening up to the findings of the humanities, thus enhancing our understanding of the text's context and circumstances.
- Reinstating the effectiveness of reason in the interpretation approach, not as a substitute for narrative, but rather as an aid in grasping the text's objectives and applying them to reality.
- Supporting the movement of disciplined interpretive ijtihad in seminaries and universities, achieving a balance between the constant and the variable, and contributing to the renewal of religious discourse with a responsible, scientific spirit. Finally, viewing interpretation as a constantly evolving, interactive process that neither excludes nor freezes heritage is a necessary prelude to preserving the text from stagnation and avoiding the lap of interpretive chaos. The text will always remain a fertile field for dialogue between past and future, between the constant and the variable, and between reason and revelation.

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