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Examples of Intertextual Polysemy from Qur'anic and Arabic Perspectives

This chapter gives a few examples of the application of intertextual polysemy for Qur'anic hermeneutics. These examples represent two forms of analysis. The first is that analysis can be done independently from other scriptures. The second aspect is a comparative analysis between the Qur'an and the Bible. The reason behind this is to show the extent of intertextuality between the Qur'an and itself, as well as between the Qur'an and the Bible. More examples of intertextual polysemy between the Qur'an and the Bible will be discussed in Chapters 5–7. This means that Muḥammad, in his creative state of mind, made associations between his sayings in Arabic and engaging with the Bible, which he likely had access to and expected his audience to be well-versed in, to further understand his sayings.

Intertextual polysemy between the Qur'an, itself, and the Bible

According to Muslim tradition, the first passages of the Qur'an revealed to Muḥammad were the first five verses of sūrah al-ʿAlaq.¹ I find these presumed first Qur'anic passages to be interesting because they talk about the creation of the human from a “clinging.” Although we may infer what the clinging is, it does not answer why such a clinging is so important that it is traditionally considered the first chapter revealed in the Qur'an. Why does the Qur'an specify the clinging as the means of human creation? Why does it not state that the human is created from sperm (*nuṭfah*) or clay (*turāb*)? Are these simply rhyming words? If so, then why not choose words in the rest of the verses that rhyme with sperm (*nuṭfah*) or clay (*turāb*)? Stating that the human is created from a clinging, which is assumed to be the clinging of a fetus in its mother's womb, must serve a purpose for Muḥammad. Traditionally, the first passages revealed in the Qur'an are believed to be the following:

¹ Recite (*Iqra'*) in the Name of thy Lord Who divided (created),² divided (created) man from a clinging (*ʿalaq*).³ ³ Recite! (*Iqra'*) Thy Lord is most noble, ⁴ Who taught (*ʿallam*) by the Pen, ⁵ taught (*ʿallam*) the human⁴ that which he knew not.⁵

The first verse of the chapter of the Clinging (*al-ʿAlaq*) talks about the Qur'an, its revelation and proclamation, and its creation (or division). The second verse discusses

the creation (or division) of the human being from a clinging (*'alaq*).⁶ Qur'anic exegetes consider the clinging described in the second verse to be that of a fetus in its mother's womb.⁷ Verses 3–5 reiterate the proclamation of the Qur'an (*iqra'*) and portray how God teaches the human being things that the human being did not know before.

To me, the mystery of the first Qur'anic revelations lies within understanding the significance of the creation of the human being from a clinging (*'alaq*) in the womb. Although Qur'anic commentators are capable of answering what the clinging is, they fail to answer the question of why this clinging is so significant that it is traditionally in the first verses of the Qur'an and the chapter is even named after such clinging. Using intertextual polysemy, the answer to that question may be simple and the Qur'an may be giving a very informative interpretation of the meanings behind the clinging.⁸ Roots of the keywords in the first passages of the chapter of Clinging (sūrah al-*'Alaq*) are to be compared with the first passages of sūrah al-Raḥmān, as part of the intertextuality: “¹ The Compassionate (*al-Raḥmān*) ² taught (*'allam*) the Quran; ³ divided (created) man; ⁴ taught him (*'allamahu*) speech (the clarity) (*al-bayān*).”⁹

From the first passages of sūrah al-Raḥmān, the root keywords may be compared with those of sūrah al-*'Alaq*. There are six points of intertextuality:

1. The second verse of sūrah al-Raḥmān states that God teaches the Qur'an, sharing the same root of the word Qur'an, “*iqra'*” when compared with the first and third verses of sūrah al-*'Alaq*, and it is stated that God teaches the proclamation of the Qur'an.
2. The first verse of sūrah al-*'Alaq* states to read or to proclaim in the name of the Lord. The first verse of sūrah al-Raḥmān uses one of the names of God (the Lord), which is the Most Compassionate, or *al-Raḥmān*.¹⁰
3. The third verse of sūrah al-Raḥmān uses the term for the creation (or division) of the human being, “*khalaq*,” which may be compared with the same words used in the first two verses of sūrah al-*'Alaq*.
4. The third verse of sūrah al-Raḥmān also uses the term for the human, “*al-insān*,” which corresponds to the same term used by the second and fifth verses of sūrah al-*'Alaq*.
5. The fourth and fifth verses of sūrah al-*'Alaq* describe God teaching, “*'allam*,” which can also be seen in the second and fourth verses of sūrah al-Raḥmān.
6. The fourth verse of sūrah al-Raḥmān explains, in a similar way to that of sūrah al-*'Alaq*, that God teaches the human being things that he knew not or the “*bayān*.”

The first passages of sūrah al-*'Alaq* and sūrah al-Raḥmān seem to be entwined with and interrelated to each other. According to Michael Fishbane's technique,¹¹ this would mean that those two passages allude to each other, or at least the latter alludes to the former, whichever came first. Unfortunately, the traditional methods of Qur'anic hermeneutics would not have revealed the interrelationship of the roots of the keywords between the passages. However, understanding this relationship seems to be essential for Qur'anic interpretation, as the Qur'an is not only trying to explain what the clinging (*al-'alaq*) really means, but it is also portraying the significance of why this clinging (*al-'alaq*) is revealed in the traditionally first revelations of the Qur'an.

Since the binding relationship between *sūrah al-ʿAlaq* and *sūrah al-Raḥmān* is firmly established, then it can be seen that *sūrah al-ʿAlaq* is not simply speaking of the creation (*khlq*) of the human being as a clinging fetus in the mother's womb or even the division (*khlq*) of the fetus from the womb during birth. The term for womb is "*r ḥ m*," which shares the same root as the first verse of *sūrah al-Raḥmān*, naming God as the Most Compassionate (*al-Raḥmān*), after which the whole chapter is named. From this method of Qur'anic hermeneutics, the Qur'an may seem to use inner-Qur'anic allusion to interpret itself. *Sūrah al-ʿAlaq* is not talking of the creation of the human being as a clinging fetus in its mother's womb (*r ḥ m*), but speaking about the creation of the human being as the human clings unto God (*al-Raḥmān*). The portrayal of the fetus clinging in the mother's womb in the physical realm is used as a metaphor for the clinging unto God (*al-ta'alluq bil-Raḥmān*). It might be for that reason that *sūrah al-Raḥmān* is traditionally called the Bride of the Qur'an,¹² because it attempts to describe the womb that teaches the human being the Qur'an, as in the chapter of the Clinging (*sūrah al-ʿAlaq*). Here, it may be seen that the final redactors of the Qur'an wanted these two passages to allude to each other, or that Muḥammad, in his high state of creativity, associated things that appear to be unrelated through a polysemous manner to create metaphor. According to a prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*): "The Prophet states, 'No one enters heaven (*al-jannah*) with his works,' so he was asked, 'Not even you?' and he replied, 'Not even me, unless my Lord encompasses me with mercy (*raḥmah*).'"¹³

In an Islamic context, God's heaven (*jannah*) is portrayed in His mercy (*raḥmah*). According to the method of intertextual polysemy, this understanding of heaven and God's mercy is interesting. As a fetus (*janīn*) is in the mother's womb (*rḥm*), so is heaven (*jannah*) in God's mercy (*raḥmah*). The terms fetus (*janīn*) and heaven (*jannah*) share the same root, as do the terms womb (*rḥm*) and mercy (*raḥmah*). The Qur'an uses the physical conception and birth of human beings as a metaphor for their spiritual birth through their clinging unto God.

The mother's womb feeds the fetus through the umbilical cord into its navel, which is called "*surrah*." The root of the word for the navel, "*surrah*," is embedded in the term "*srr*," which means secret.¹⁴ The term for belly is "*baṭn*," which shares the same root as the term "*bāṭin*" describing the inner or hidden meanings.¹⁵ Perhaps Muḥammad is trying to show a metaphorical analogy that as the fetus clings unto the mother's womb to be fed through its navel (*surrah*) in their bellies (*baṭn*), so are those who cling unto God fed with divine mysteries (*asrār*) of the inner meanings (*bāṭin*) of life. This is perhaps what *sūrah al-ʿAlaq* and *sūrah al-Raḥmān* explain: it is God who teaches the human being knowledge that he did not know before. How does God teach that knowledge, according to the Qur'an? The knowledge is taught as the human being clings unto God as a fetus clings unto a mother's womb. This appears to be the first message that the Qur'an tries to explain, in its presumed first passages. This might be paralleled with the teaching of being born from above, as narrated in the Gospel of John:

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be

born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"¹⁶

Using intertextual polysemy for Qur'anic hermeneutics provides insight by not only answering the question "what" is stated by the Qur'an, as the majority of Qur'anic scholars and commentators try to explain in their interpretations, but more importantly answers the question "why." Here, understanding Muḥammad's state of mind in making creative associations and producing metaphor tells us what could be his intentions in making the Qur'anic statements. Although they may seem erratic, they are not an example of a thought disorder, but they are creative pieces.

Comparing Islamic ruling with the text: divorce

In this example, intertextual polysemy is used to compare Islamic Shari'ah with the text of the Qur'an. The story of Moses' meeting with a mystical character, presumably al-Khiḍr in sūrah al-Kahf (Chapter of the Cave),¹⁷ is a story filled with mystery, as the outer actions are not evidence of their inner meanings. It is mysterious in such a way that even Moses could not easily comprehend the events that were going on during his meeting with the mystical figure. Nonetheless, if I claim a hypothesis that one of the intentions of the Qur'an's creative associations in the story is its relationship with the Islamic ruling of divorce, then it may not be easily perceived, because such an association is not obvious in the story. However, when using intertextual polysemy, it may be seen that such a relationship may be valid, given Muḥammad's state of mind.

The story of the meeting between Moses and the mystical figure, presumably al-Khiḍr, provides insight into the possible Qur'anic eloquence in the precise usage of terms. The passages relate that al-Khiḍr and Moses travel through three different journeys together. At the start of each journey, the Qur'an uses the term "*intalaqā*" (i.e., Qur'an 18:71, 18:74, 18:77), which means that they both proceeded or traveled.¹⁸ However, the root of the word is "*ṭalaq*," which shares the same root as divorce (*ṭalāq*).¹⁹ According to the Qur'an, after the third divorce, the man and the woman may no longer reconcile with each other, unless the woman had married and divorced a different husband (i.e., Qur'an 2:229–230).²⁰

According to the story of al-Khiḍr and Moses in those passages, they used the term "*intalaqā*" for each of their three journeys. After the third "*ṭalaq*" (travel or divorce),

they separated without reconciliation, in accordance with the rules of divorce (*ṭalāq*) in the Islamic Shari'ah, as per the Qur'an. This is perhaps a way that the Qur'an subtly introduces a spiritual message within it as part of its creative style. Conventional methods of exegesis would not provide us with such insights. Hence, the method of intertextual polysemy is not necessarily replacing conventional methods, but one that might complement it by providing innovative perspectives through understanding Muḥammad's state of mind and authorial intent within a linguistic approach, which is the only tangible method emphasized and sanctioned by the Qur'an.

Zechariah and a son²¹

Zechariah is made of two words put together, "*zakar*" and "*Yah*." In Hebrew, "*zakar*" means remember, male, or male organ, as it is cognate to the Arabic "*dhakar*." The word "*Yah*" means God (*Yahweh*). Hence, Zechariah means God has remembered or the remembrance of God. The chapter of Maryam in the Qur'an begins with the story of Zechariah using "*dhikr*" (remembrance) of God for his servant Zechariah (remembrance of God). "A reminder (*dhikr*) of the Mercy (*rahmah*) of thy Lord unto His servant, Zachariah. . ."²²

According to the Qur'an, God granted Zechariah a son. The term "*dhikr*" is related to the male organ. The term for mercy (*rahmah*) shares the same root as womb (*rahm*). What is the significance of this? To make a child, or create the human, the sperm fertilizes the ovula, and then it splits into a new creation. This means that the male organ (*dhakar*) flows with sperm that enters the womb (*rahm*), just as the story of Zechariah starts in the above verse. This is a simple example of the use of intertextual polysemy in the Qur'an.