

MA'NA-CUM-MAGHZA APPROACH TO THE QUR'AN: INTERPRETATION OF Q. 5:51

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Abstract

Q. 51:5 has been very famous and widely discussed not only by Indonesian Muslims but also by non-Muslims since September 2016. This debate was caused by the case of the former Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Cahya Purnama who has widely been known as Ahok. However, I would not like to discuss this case in this article. Rather, the topic that will be explored here is how to understand and interpret the verse in a proper way. I am interested in this topic because it has been understood and interpreted in an improperly and used by certain Muslim groups for a certain political purpose. Looking at this fact, I will try to propose an interpretation of it by using an approach what I call ma'na-cum-maghza approach.

Keywords: Ma'na-cum-maghza, Textualist, Contextualist, Quasi-objectivist, Conservative

Introduction

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Before mentioning this approach and how to apply it to Q. 5:51, I would like first of all to explain briefly the contemporary approaches to the Qur'an. Abdullah Saeed in the introduction to his work *Interpreting the Qur'an* mentions three main exegetical approaches: textualist, semi-textualist and contextualist. According to him, the first two approaches have focused their analyses on the linguistic aspect of the Qur'an, while ignoring the context of the Qur'anic revelation. The difference among them only lies in the usage of idioms. The textualist school has used the traditional vocabularies, whereas the semi-textualist one has utilized the "modern idioms" in attempting to maintain the literal meaning of the Qur'an. Unlike them, the contextualist approach does not merely pay attention to the linguistically of the Qur'an, but also to its socio-historical context. It does not take its literal meaning for granted. The appropriation of a certain Qur'anic message with a contemporary situation is for contextualists is very possible (Saeed, 2006: 3-4). According to my research finding, the contemporary exegetical schools can also be divided into three kinds: quasi-objectivist conservative, subjectivist and quasi-objectivist progressive (Syamsuddin, 2009: 39-78). For me, what is meant by Saeed with the textualist and semi-textualist interpreters might be included into the quasi-objectivist conservative school, whereas the contextualist interpreter is the same as the quasi-objectivist progressive one. What is missing in Saeed's theory is the subjectivist school which tries to interpret the Qur'an by ignoring its historical/original meaning. Rather, it

focuses only on the significance of the Qur'anic text for the contemporary needs. The *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach can be included into the quasi-objectivist approach or contextualist one, but the methodical strategies of the former are a little bit different from those of the later, as seen in the following part of this article.

Ma'na-cum-Maghza Approach

What is meant by the term '*ma'na-cum-maghza* approach' is an exegetical approach in which someone tries to grasp the original historical meaning (*ma'na*) of a text (i.e. the Qur'an) that was understood by its first audience, and to develop its significance (*maghza*) for the contemporary situation. There are other terms whose methodical substance is similar to this approach. Fazlur Rahman calls it 'double movement' approach. Abdullah Saeed develops in his works *Interpreting the Qur'an* (Saeed, 2006) and *Reading the Quran in the 21st Century* (Saeed, 2014) what he calls 'contextualist approach'. However, both Rahman's double movement and Saeed's contextualist approach seem to be applied only to the interpretation of Qur'anic legal verses. On the other hand, the *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach is supposed to be appropriate for the whole Qur'an.

The assumption of this approach is that every text, including the Qur'anic text, has, for the first time, its historical meaning that is specific to its context. This results from the fact that the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in the culturally bound situations. The meaning of a certain Qur'anic text becomes universal through a process of its further interpretation. On this basis, in order to understand its original meaning, it is very important for an interpreter to pay attention not only to the textuality of the text but also to its historical context. In this case, the analysis of the Qur'anic language in the light of the Arabic of the 7th/1st century is an obligatory attempt. This process is based on the fact that in every language there are synchronic and diachronic aspects. The synchronic aspect is the linguistic one that does not change at all, whereas the diachronic one is the one that changes from time to time. In order to prevent from a misunderstanding of a text, someone has to be aware of the development of a meaning of word, idiom, phrase, and structure. For example, the Arabic word *ikhlas* that basically means a state of making something pure is subject to development. In the pre-Islamic tradition, the word refers to an action of making something pure in a secular context. In the Qur'an this word is used either in a secular context or in a religious one. In relation to its Qur'anic usage in a religious sense, it means a monotheistic belief and action, so that its meaning is the same as that of *tawhid* (the unity of God). Evidence that can support this finding is that the sura whose verses talk about monotheism is called *surat al-ikhlas* (Ibn Manzur, n.d: 15, 1227). The term is then defined by Muslim scholars as an act of directing all good deeds only for the purpose of getting God's mercy. It means that it has pre-Qur'anic, Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic meanings, although its basic meaning still exists.

For the purpose of finding the historical meaning, which, according to Jorge Gracia, constitutes the "historical function of interpretation" (Gracia, 1996: 155), someone should also pay attention to the micro and macro historical situation in which a certain verse or sura was revealed. In this case, the *asbab al-nuzul* ("occasions of revelation") and the historical accounts of culture, tradition, legal system, socio-political situation and economic condition to which the Qur'an possibly responded are very helpful in this attempt. Many classical Muslim scholars asserted that no body could understand the Qur'an properly unless he or she knew its *asbab al-nuzul*. 'Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi (d. 468 H.), for example, writes in his work *Asbab al-Nuzul*, "The *Asbab al-Nuzul* are the most complete aspect to be understood and the first one to be paid attention to, because it is impossible to interpret a verse and its intention without understanding its

story and explanation.” (Al-Wahidi, n.d: 8) According to Fazlur Rahman, it can lead someone not only to find the possibly original meaning of the Qur’anic text but also to grasp what he calls *ratio legis* on which a Qur’anic ruling was based (Rahman: 5-6). Abdullah Saeed points out that the knowledge of the socio-historical context can help someone to decide whether the message of a certain Qur’anic verse should be particularly or universally applied (Saeed: 123-124). Even, according to Angelika Neuwirth, in order to understand the historical meaning of the Qur’an, someone should consider the Qur’anic dialectics with other religious texts that existed prior to the emergence of the Qur’anic text (Neuwirth, 2008: 157-187).

However, the understanding of the original/historical meaning constitutes a starting point for a further deeper interpretation which is relevant for a contemporary time in which such interpretation is conducted. There are several hermeneutical ways to develop and broaden the meaning of the Qur’anic text so that it can be appropriate for the contemporary period. Generally speaking, we can use Graci’s terms in relation to the “functions of interpretation,” i.e. “meaning function” and “implicative function” (Gracia: 160-164). Gadamer’s theory of “*Anwendung*” is also relevant for the re-interpretation of religious text by paying attention not only to the horizon of the text but also that of the interpreter. In this case, the subjectivity of the interpreter plays an important role, but it is still acceptable because this re-interpretation constitutes a continuation of the historical meaning of the text under interpretation (Gadamer, 1990: 310, 392). A new meaning of the text might be called *maghza* (“significance”).

Application of the Approach to Q. 5: 51

Q. 5:51 reads: “O you who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your *awliya*’ (friends and protectors): they are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily Allah guides not a people unjust.”

Literally speaking, Q. al-Ma’idah: 51 contains about the prohibition of Muslims to appoint the Jews and the Christians as *awliya*’. The question is what does the word mean: a loyal friend/alliance or a leader? What was a historical context of its revelation? Is the verse universal? What moral ideas that might be contained in it? Before answering these questions, it should be mentioned first that in order to understand it, one should pay attention to its historical context, its linguistic aspects, and its moral idea.

a) Historical Context

The verse represents a medinan verse, i.e. it was revealed after the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his Meccan Companions to Medina. As soon as he reached Medina in 622 AD, he found that the people of Medina were quite plural in terms of religious and ethnic affiliations. In addition to the Muslims of the Ansar and the Muhajirun, there had also lived Jews, Christians, and pagans long before his migration. With regard to Arab tribes in the city, at least, there were two major tribes, namely Aus and Khazraj, who had fought each other. Considering the need for the unity among these religious communities and the tribes, the Prophet Muhammad then established the “Medinan Charter” (*Mithaq al-Madina*). With this charter, all components of the city were supposed to be able to live together harmoniously and help each other to build a civilization. This is put in a brief and beautiful way by Fazlur Rahman, as follows:

In Medina the Prophet promulgated a charter guaranteeing the religious freedom of the Jews as community, emphasizing the closest possible cooperation among the Muslims, calling on the Jews and the Muslims to cooperate for peace and, so far as

general laws and order was concerned, ensuring the absolute authority of the Prophet to decide and settle disputes (Rahman, 1979: 18-19; Peters, 1994: 198-202)

However, after the prophet and his companions had lived for about two years in the city, their good relation with the Jews had begun to loose, and this situation had become much worse after the emergence of Badr battle between the Muslims and the Meccan polytheists in 624 AD (Peters: 202). This is due to the distortion done by the Jews, namely Banu Nadhir, Banu Qaynuqa' and Banu Qurayzah, against the peace treaty, i.e., the Medinan Charter. Ka'ab ibn al-Ashraf, the leader, and poet of Banu Nadhir, is said to hate Islam. With his poems he invited people to fight against the Muslims of Medina. After the Battle of Badr, he composed many sorrowful poems over the killing of the leaders of the Meccan idolaters. He also contacted Abu Sufyan to jointly destroy the Muslims. There was one narration mentioning that Ka'ab once planned the assassination of the Prophet Muhammad (<https://www.al-islam.org/life-muhammad-prophet-sayyid-saeed-akhtar-rizvi/battles>).

Moreover, Banu Qaynuqa' performed sedition and betrayal against the Muslims during the Battle of Badr and withdrew from the peace treaty. It is also reported that this Jewish community harassed and harmed a Muslim woman shopping in a shop of a Jew. This woman is said to be embarrassed by a Jew taking off her clothing. This provoked the anger of Muslims and, therefore, a severe dispute happened. A Muslim who was at that time near to the shop killed the Jew, and he was also killed by another Jew. Finally, this event heard by the Prophet and reproached this event (<https://www.al-islam.org/life-muhammad-prophet-sayyid-saeed-akhtar-rizvi/battles>). What the Jews conducted was of course considered to be breaking the Medinan Charter.

The story mentioned above is the macro-historical context of the revelation of Q. al-Ma'idah: 51. In addition, this verse also has a micro *sabab al-nuzul* (the occasion of the revelation). With this regard, some scholars mentioned some variant stories. A transmitter said that the verse referred to the story of 'Ubada ibn al-Samit who no longer trusted the Jews and the Christians in Medina as alliances (*awliya'*) that could help Muslims in war against the Meccan polytheists, and 'Abd Allah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul who still trusted them as comrades. Some other narrations explain that the verse was related to Abu Lubaba who sent the Messenger of Allah to Banu Quraizhah which undermined the covenant of support and peace with the Prophet and his people. Another narrative explains that the verse was related to Muslims' worries after the emergence of Uhud war; therefore, some of them tried to ask for help from the Jewish friends, and others wanted to seek help from the Christians in Medina; the verse was revealed to advise the Muslims at that time not to ask for help from them (Al-Wahidi: 103). Regardless of the different reports, it can be underlined that the verse was revealed in the context of a war, in which the carefulness was very important for the war strategies so that seeking for help from alliances which had no strong commitment to Medina was avoided. In short, the context of the revelation of the verse was neither friendship in peaceful situation nor the election for a political position.

b) Linguistic Analyses

With regard to the linguistic aspect, the verse contains several important vocabularies that must be analyzed carefully. However, this article is not meant to mention all of them, but some of them, as follows.

The first is the word *awliya'*. This word is a plural form of the word *waliy*, which is derived from the word *wilaya* or *walaya*. Ibn Manzur says that the word has two possible meanings, as follows: (1) *imara* (doing things related to *tadbir* [arrangement], *qudrah* [power] and *fi'l* [action]); and (2) *nusra* (help). Some linguists tend to say that the

word *wilaya* refers to the first meaning, and whereas *walaya* stands for the second meaning. The word *wilaya* has *isim al-fa'il* (noun referring to a doer): *wali* (person of rule, power, and action) (plural: *wulat*), while *walaya* has *isim al-fa'il: waliy* (helpful person) (plural: *awliya*). Both *wali* and *waliy* are used as good names of Allah (*al-asma' al-husna*), which mean that God governs all affairs in this universe and gives help (Manzhur, n.d: 4920). The question now is: what meaning is more appropriate for the word *awliya* in Q. 5: 51? According to a hermeneutical theory, both in philosophical and Islamic literature, in order to understand a word one should pay attention to the usage of the word intended by the author of the text, or understood by its historical audience at the time in which it was made or revealed.

The historical audiences of the verse are the Prophet and his Companions. There is a prophetic tradition (hadith) which can help us to know the 'intended' meaning of the word *awliya*, i.e. 'friends, alliances or helpers', not 'leaders'. The Hadith in question is, as follows: "Whoever is hostile to my *wali*, I proclaim the war with him."

The word *wali* in this hadith does not mean 'leader', because the (supreme) leader of the Muslims at the time was the Prophet himself. It means rather 'a close man' (faithful friend) of the Prophet. Some scholars explain that the *wali* refers to the Prophet's friends, such as Bilal ibn Abi Rabbah, Abu Bakr, and others. In history, we know that Bilal was not a leader, but a slave freed by Abu Bakr. He was one of the Prophet's close friends, and not the leader of the Prophet.

Muqatil ibn Sulayman, a *tabi'i* (disciple of the Companion(s) of the Prophet) tends to interpret the word *awliya* in that verse with 'helpers' (Sulayman, n.d: 305). Likewise, Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari interprets it with '*ansar wa hulafa*' (helpers and alliances or close friends) (Al-Thabari, n.d: v01.8, 507). The Indonesian translation of the verse, which is in accordance with Muqatil's and al-Tabari's understanding is the translation of M. Quraish Shihab (Shihab, n.d: 117). On the basis of the above-mentioned data, it can be concluded that the meaning of the word is 'close friends, alliances, and helpers'.

Second, the particle *al* in the words *al-yahud* and *al-nasara*. According to the Arabic grammar, the particle whose function is to make *nakira* (unknown noun) become *ma'rifa* (known noun). It has two possible meanings: namely (1) *li 'ahd al-dhihn*, meaning that something or someone is already known and determined, and (2) *li istighraq al-jins*, in the sense of covering all things or persons meant by the word. With regard to *al-yahud* and *al-nasara*, I prefer to say that the meaning of the particle *al* would be *li 'ahd al-dhihn*, so the words mean: 'the certain Jews and Christians of Medina', not all of them. If we consider the above historical context, it can be said that the verse prohibits the Muslims to appoint the certain Jews and Christians in Medina who have betrayed the peace treaty (i.e. the Medinan Charter) during the time of the Prophet as alliances and helpers (*awliya*). Contrary speaking, it is allowed for them to build a friendship with good, trustworthy Jews, Christians or people of other religions.

Conclusion: *Maqshad al-Ayat* (Moral Idea of the Verse)

Considering the above-mentioned aspects, we can say that the universal idea or universal message of the verse is, at least, as follows:

First, the verse suggests Muslims for building a friendship with trustworthy people, especially in relation to matters of great importance in social life. It prohibits them from choosing alliances or friends who are not trustworthy or have betrayed unless they have repented and become good people.

Second, a mutual commitment and mutual agreement must be enforced and should not betray. If the commitment is damaged, the trust will disappear from the group

that is betrayed. This happened at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The trust of the Medina Muslims toward the Jews and Christians who violated the Medinan Charter was broken.

Third, the verse has nothing to do with the election of a head of state or head of region. Islam only teaches that the head of state or region should be able to conduct justice to all people who are under his territory and authority, regardless of religious and tribal differences. Just attitude toward all people must be upheld, and unjust behavior must be abandoned.

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