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İSLÂMÎ İLİMLER ARAŞTIRMA VAKFI

INCORPORATİNG IZUTSU'S "PHİLOSOPHİCAL SEMANTİCS" INTO CONTEMPORARY TAFSİR

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For much of its history, *tafsīr* has been an experimental genre. Many of the most impactful *tafāsīr* were so "innovative" when written that they were denounced by scholars of the period. When Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī wrote *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb* (*Keys to the Unseen*), a scholar well read in *tafsīr* would have been unprepared for the text had he not been well-trained in theological philosophy. Several generations earlier, Abū Isḥāq al-Thaʿlabī's (d. 427/1035) *al-Kashf wa l-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* opened the genre to a host of materials that had never been seen in *tafsīr*. As Walid Saleh demonstrates, while al-Ṭabarī developed the exegetical form that was to prevail, the content of *tafsīr* was shaped more by al-Thaʿlabī's *Kashf*, since it forged the methodology whereby *tafsīr* "absorbed and appropriated any new development" in Islamic culture.[1] One could even say that it was al-Thaʿlabī's approach that opened the field of *tafsīr* to become multiple genres.[2]

Understanding the diverse multiform nature of *tafsīr* is of fundamental importance when we contemplate the contemporary period. On the one hand, there have been efforts to open *tafsīr* to all manner of influence.[3] On the other, there have been multiple efforts to limit *tafsīr* to narrow definitions. Nothing represents this latter trend better than the omnipresence of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, a text that was not widely regarded in its time but is now considered by many to be synonymous

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[1] Walid Saleh, "Hermeneutics: al-Thaʿlabī," 2006, 331.

[2] As Walid Saleh writes, "unlike other Islamic sciences, which systematized their methodological underpinnings, the Quranic commentary tradition never established unanimous rules for how to interpret the Quran. There was more than one hermeneutical theory in medieval Islam." Waleed Saleh, "Quranic Commentaries" in Ed. S. H. Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohamed Rustom, *The Study Quran* (HaperOne, 2015), 1645-1678,

[3] See Taha Abd al-Raḥmān

with the word *tafsīr* itself.[4] Meanwhile, many of the most influential commentaries of the pre-modern period remain virtually unknown. For example, 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī b. Muhammad al-Khāzin's (d. 741/1340) *Lubāb al-ta'wīl fī ma'ānī al-tanzīl* (*Kernels of Interpretation Regarding the Realities of Revelation*) was once among the most widely circulated commentaries in the Muslim world.[5] Yet a printed edition only recently appeared, there are no critical editions, and no analytical studies have been conducted. Shaykh Zādeh Muhammad al-Qūjāwī (d. 951/1544) wrote the most widely circulated *hāshiya* on al-Baydāwī's (d. 719/1319) *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl*, yet not a single study of it has been published in any European language.

In recent years, the field of *tafsīr* studies has exploded, and at long last the complexity and the diversity of the tradition is beginning to be better appreciated. There is still, however, a long way to go, and many remain beholden to the facile distinction between *tafsīr bi' l-ma'thūr* (exegesis through transmission) and *tafsīr bi' l-ra'y* (deductive or rational interpretation). This means of categorizing *tafsīr* is more sectarian than analytical, and deeply embedded in value judgments that function to privilege certain schools of thought. A narrow understanding of *tafsīr* has led to circumstances where, with little analysis, many scholars discard some of the tools that could provide deeper insight into the meaning of the Quranic text. Such an approach is antithetical to the nature of the *tafsīr* tradition and, I would argue, to the nature the Islamic intellectual tradition. As the Prophet (SAWS) has said, "Wisdom is the lost camel of the believer" (*al-hikmat dāllat al-mu'min* – Ibn Habbān).[6] One area where there is an opportunity for development of *tafsīr* by employing methodologies that bridge the gap between the classical and the contemporary, as well as the East and the West is semantic analysis developed by Toshihiko Izutsu.

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[4] While teaching in the Gulf, I have on more than one occasion needed to remind a student that Ibn Kathīr is not God and that they should ask whether a particular Quranic passage does in fact correspond to Ibn Kathīr's presentation of it. The reaction is invariably that a student looks at me nonplussed wondering how Ibn Kathīr's understanding of the Quran could be different than the meaning of the Quran itself.

[5] Samuel Ross, Youtube.

[6] When *tafsīr* is robust and dynamic, it follows the path advised by Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī who writes in *al-Munqidh min al-dallāl*, that we "Must be zealous to extract the truth from the claims of those who are misguided, knowing that the gold mine is dust and gravel." (al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, 546).

Since the appearance of *God and Man in the Qur'an* in 1964, followed by *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* in 1966, Toshihiko Izutsu has had an enduring impact on the study of the Quran in the Euro-American academy and in many parts of the Muslim world. His books on the Quran have been translated into Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and Bahasa-Indonesian among other languages of the Islamicate. Scholars from the United States to Morocco to Turkey and Iran and onto Indonesia and Japan and many places in between continue to employ and expand upon his methodology.[7]

If, however, one were to look at some recent literature that proposes to outline the state of the field of contemporary Quranic Studies, one could be forgiven for not being aware of the extent of Izutsu's impact. When, for example, Devin Stewart wrote his "Reflections on the State of the Art in Western Qur'anic Studies" for the volume *Islam and Its Past*, Izutsu received but one mention in passing among those who wrote on "the Qur'an's major themes." (16) Similarly in the volume on *Qur'ānic Studies Today* published in 2016 there is no mention of Izutsu. By no means does every scholar need to cite Izutsu, employ his methodology, or build upon him. But omission of Izutsu in volumes that propose to survey the state of the field of Quranic Studies constitutes a significant misrepresentation of the field. On the one hand, Izutsu's methodology continues to remain central to the work of scholars such as Yerusha Lamptey,[8]

Atif Khalil, Daniel Madigan in the West, as well as Muhammad al-Būzī, Sāmir Rishwāni and others in the Muslim World. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, Izutsu's methodology provides a manner of avoiding many of the pitfalls of the linguistic revisionism and historical revisionism that have hampered the development of Quranic Studies in the Euro-American academy since its inception.

Philological and etymological analyses in the Euro-American academy have produced some significant insights into the Near Eastern milieu from which the Quran arose, but many efforts to find the origins of Quranic words in other languages have been speculative, contradictory, and misleading. As Angelika Neuwirth observes, "Ul-

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[7] A search of Google Scholar indicates that Izutsu remains a frequently cited author, with over 400 citations per year in 2019 and 2020. Accessed 11/12/2021.

[8] Yerusha Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, 2014.

timately, based upon the Western philological literature on the Qur'an, the Qur'anic corpus appears to the untrained eye to consist of an amorphous set of verses with no recognizable rationale of their own."[9] In his article on "The Etymological Fallacy in Quranic Studies," Walid Saleh is more emphatic, stating that since serious academic study of Islam began in the Euro-American academy in the 19th century, linguistic analysis of the Quran has often operated within a framework that presents the Quran as a "disparate hodgepodge of a book, derivative at the lexeme level, chaotic at the compositional level, and ultimately fascinating only in so far as that we will never be able to explain its paradoxical power to hold the attention of the benighted Muslims."[10]

As a result of approaches such as those addressed by Neuwirth and Saleh, approaches that often treat the Quran as little more than a philological curiosity or that seek the meaning of the Quranic text in speculative etymologies,[11] there remains a chasm between analyses of the Quranic text in the Euro-American academy, where many scholars comb over the texts of the ancient Near East to "discover" the historical, literary, and linguistic roots of the Quran, and analyses of the Quran in Muslim academic circles, where the Quran is often (though not always) perceived as an organic whole, whose linguistic subtleties reveal ever deeper levels of meaning and intertextuality. I cannot analyze all of these approaches here, such as the detailed intertextual linguistic analyses of Fāḍil Ṣāliḥ al-Sāmirā'ī or al-'Allāma al-Muṣtafāwī's fourteen volume *al-Taḥqīq fī kalimāt al-Qur'ān*,[12] scholars whose detailed analyses of the Quran remain almost completely

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[9] Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of the Community*, 35.

[10] Walid Saleh, "The Etymological Fallacy in Quranic Studies" in *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigation into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwrith, Nicolae Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 667.

[11] I use the word "approaches" rather than methodologies, as a "methodology" is ideally an objective systematic analytical tool that can be reproduced and refined by other scholars. In the case of etymological speculations such as those produced by Alphonse Mingana or Cristoph Luxenberg, there is no systematic methodology that can be reproduced. Rather there is a hodgepodge of assertions and speculations that cannot be historically proven.

[12] Al-'Allāma al-Muṣtafāwī, *al-Taḥqīq fī kalimāt al-Qur'ān* [Defining the words of the Quran], 14 vols. (Tehran: Markaz Nashr Āthār al-'Allāma al-Muṣtafāwī, 2006),

unknown to scholars working in the Euro-American academy. In this brief discussion, I will focus on Toshihiko Izutsu's "philosophical semantics" of the Quran. In addition to being one of the few scholars that has already had a significant impact among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, Izutsu is also one of the few scholars whose methodology can allow for the absorption of new facts regarding the Near Eastern milieu in which the Quran arose without requiring a complete reconstruction/revision the Quran's historical and linguistic milieu.

Like any scholar, Izutsu's methodology is built upon several presuppositions regarding the background of the Quranic text, namely that the Quran was written in Arabic, that it arose within Arabia, that the text we have before us today is similar to or even identical to the original text, and that the pre-Islamic poetry recorded during the Abbasid period is a faithful preservation of the Arabic language before the rise of Islam. While I cannot address each of these issues in detail here, it should be noted that the first three of these positions regarding the Quranic text have received substantial support as the field has turned to empirical analysis of the material evidence—the manuscript tradition—over the past forty years, and especially in the last ten years, and the speculations of historical revisionism have receded. As the work of scholars such as Behnam Sadeghi,[13] Marijn van Putten,[14] Hythem Sidky,[15] and others has demonstrated, the manuscript tradition provides sufficient evidence to indicate that all manuscripts link to a single source during the period of Uthman and any interpolations or "additions to the text" are prior to the point at which this source was established. (Importance)

Analysis of the semantic structure of texts and of the Quran in particular was far more than a textual study for Izutsu. It was a study of the manner in which language and major semantic shifts structure human consciousness and our relationship to the world around us. Explaining his approach, he writes,

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[13] Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, "The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qur'ān of the Prophet." *Arabica* 57 (2010): 343–436; Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the origins of the Qur'ān", Der Islam 87 (2012), 1–129.

[14] Marijn van Putten, "'The Grace of God' as evidence for a written Uthmanic archetype: the importance of shared orthographic idiosyncrasies," *Bulletin of SOAS*, 82, 2 (2019), 271–288.

[15] Hythem Sidky, "On the Regionality of Qur'ānic Codices," *JIQSA* 5 (2020), 133-210.

Semantics, as I understand it, is an analytic study of the key-terms of a language with a view to arriving eventually at a conceptual grasp of the *weltanschauung* or world-view of the people who use that language as a tool not only of speaking and thinking, but, more important still, of conceptualizing and interpreting the world that surrounds them. Semantics . . .is a kind of *weltanschauungslehre*, a study of the nature and structure of the world-view of a nation at this or that significant period of its history, conducted by means of a methodological analysis of the major cultural concepts the nation has produced for itself and crystallized into the key-words of its language.[16]

He then explains that when we study the semantics of the Quran, we are not simply studying language, we are looking at the Quran's view of "Being," as opposed to the static ontology of a philosopher or a philosophical system.[17] From Izutsu's perspective, a semantic *weltanschauung* is a "dynamic ontology"—a dynamic understanding of the nature of reality, and our understanding of reality is the reality in which we live (childhood anecdote). To recover this "dynamic ontology," Izutsu's method of analyzing "semantic fields" demands that one not be tied to the manner in which the later Islamic tradition interpreted certain words, phrases, and verses. His concern is thus to attain, as best we can, what Aziz al-Azmeh refers to as a "pre-exegetical reading of the Quran." As Izutsu writes in chapter three of *God and Man in the Quran*,

For the purpose of isolating the fundamental conceptual framework of the Quran as a whole, the first requirement is that we should try to read the book without any preconception. We must, in other words, try not to read it through thoughts that have been developed and elaborated by the Muslim thinkers of the post-Quranic ages in their effort to understand and interpret their Sacred Book, each according to his particular position. We must try to grasp the structure of the Qur'anic world conception in its original form, that is, as it was read and understood by the Prophet's contemporaries and his immediate followers. Strictly speaking, this must always remain an unattainable ideal, and yet at least we should do our best to approach this ideal even a step nearer. (75)

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[16] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Culture and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 3.
[17] Ibid.

The interpretations found in the *tafāsīr* can be helpful, and Izutsu does at times incorporate them, but these interpretations are often anachronistic, reflecting the semantic *weltanschauung* of later generations rather than the "dynamic ontology" of the Quranic text itself, thus providing normative readings rather than textual analyses. Commentators who have mastered linguistic analysis may even employ it as a means of imposing their school of thought upon the Quran.[18] This can be seen for example with the many ways in which the *tafsīr* tradition seeks to avoid the literal meaning of verses such as *a lam yajdka ḍāllan fahadā*,[19] or *wa naḥnu aqrabu ilayhi min ḥabl al-warīd* (50:16).[20] As early as al-Ṭabarī, *mufassirūn* recognized the manner in which *asbāb al-nuzūl* could obfuscate the straightforward interpretation of verses such as *aynamā tawallū fa-thamma wajhullāh*.

Like Izutsu many *mufassirūn*, such as Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1344), observed that exegetical techniques could be employed to mold the Quranic text to particular ideological ends. Al-Gharnāṭī and others did not, however, develop a systematic methodology for recovering a "pre-exegetical" meaning of the text. Although many Western scholars have noted the same difficulties posed by the *tafsīr* tradition, efforts to produce alternative approaches have often veered more towards speculation than analysis. The work of Cristoph Luxenberg being perhaps the best example of the extremes to which such speculations can be taken, but many more scholars, from L. Conrad[21] to

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[18] As Walid Salih, observes, essay in SQ,

[19] Regarding the linguistic gymnastics employed to evade the literal (ẓāhir) meaning of this verse, see Walid Saleh,

[20] See *The Study Quran*.

[21] "Even words that would have been of great and immediate importance in the days of Muḥammad himself are argued over and guessed at, sometimes at great length, and with no satisfactory result. We might expect that comparisons of the work that proceeded in different regions would show that scholars of the Ḥijāz had a better record in arriving at likely or compelling solutions, since their own forefathers, the first Muslims, would have known the truth of the matter and passed it down through their descendants. But this is not the case. Confusion and uncertainty seems to be the rule, and at the centre of it all, is a written text in which textual anomalies could not be solved, and for which oral tradition offered no help, and for which clarifying context was unknown." L. Conrad, "Qur'ānic Studies: A historians perspective" in M. Kropp (ed.), *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān* (Beirut: Ergon, 2007) (9-15), 13.

Arthur Jeffrey,[22] and even Franz Rosenthal and Andrew Rippin have engaged in such etymological speculations. As regards the methodological shortcomings of this form of etymological investigation wherein one seeks the meaning of Quranic words in other Near Eastern languages, Tohsihiko Izutsu observes, "Etymology, even when we are fortunate enough to know it, can only furnish us with a clue as to the "basic" meaning of a word. And, we must remember, etymology remains in many cases a simple guess work and very often an insoluble mystery."[23] To this I would add that as we are not living in the linguistic milieu of the Quran, when we propose to redefine words based upon the meaning of words in other languages, we risk reading false cognates and false friends into the Quran.[24]

My contention is that among scholars of the Quran from the Euro-American academic tradition, Izutsu develops the most consistent methodology for understanding the Quranic text in its original linguistic milieu and recuperating or perhaps we should say, "best approximating," the "original meaning" of the text, while acknowledging that fully attaining this goal remains illusory. Izutsu's in-depth linguistic and semantic-historical analysis, does not simply place the text within a particular context, it also demonstrates how understanding that context allows us to better understand the vision of reality that the Quranic text seeks to convey. It builds from understanding the context, rather than reducing the Quran to the context. This requires building a deeper understanding of the manner in which the Quran transformed the society in which it first appeared by transforming the language. Regarding this linguistic transformation, Izutsu writes:

The words themselves were in current use in the 7th century, if not within the narrow confines of the mercantile society of Mecca, at least in some religious circle or other in Arabia: only they belonged in different conceptual systems, Islam brought them together, combined them into an entirely new hitherto unknown conceptual network. (GMQ 13)

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[22] "It has been remarked not infrequently that the Prophet had a penchant for strange and mysterious sounding words, though frequently he himself had not grasped correctly their meaning, as one sees in such cases as *furqān*, and *sakīna*. Sometimes he seems even to have invented words, such as *ghassāq*, *tasnīm*, and *salsabīl*." Arthur Jeffrey, *Foreign Vocabulary in the Qur'ān*, 390.
[23] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* (Islamic Book Trust, Kuala Lumpur, 2002), 17.
[24] Contemporary linguistic analysis of false-cognates.

This perspective allows for the fact that the Quran was in dialogue with Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as pagan Arabian traditions, but does not reduce the Quranic message to any of these sources as the "origins" of the text. Rather it views the Quran as being in dialogue with multiple traditions in Arabia, something which the Quran itself clearly conveys. As such, Izutsu's methodology recognizes that new worldviews arise through a process of dialogue with multiple perspectives and that texts arise organically within a complex linguistic and social milieu. This approach allows for the congruencies that many scholars observe in relation to pre-Islamic traditions, as well as the incongruencies, and demonstrates how these incongruencies result from a dialogical process involving multiple traditions and a reshaping of those traditions. As such it provides a bridge between non-Muslim scholars who seek to understand the *sitz in leben* of the Quranic text and Muslim scholars for whom the *sitz in leben* of the Quran remains a defining factor in their life and work. It can also provide a means whereby Muslims from different branches can share in a common discourse regarding the Quran.

As the field of Quranic studies develops, we need to build more bridges between multiple centers of Quranic Studies. Izutsu's methodology already functions as such a bridge in the Muslim world, since there are scholars working with his methodology in many different countries. His methodology can also function as a bridge between scholars in the Euro-American academy and in the Muslim world because it allows for a way to take better account of the historical linguistic milieu without requiring that one eschew tenets that are central not only to Islam, but to the Quran itself, which maintains that it is from God (*nazzala alayka al-kitāb bi-l-ḥaqq*) (*tanzīl al-kitāb*) and that it is not the words of a human being:

69:38 I swear by what you see 69:39 and what you do not see, 69:40 truly it is the speech of a noble messenger, 69:41 not the speech of a poet. Little do you believe! 69:42 Nor is it the speech of a soothsayer. Little do you reflect! 69:43 It is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds. 69:44 Had he ascribed any statements to Us, 69:45 We would have taken him by the right hand. 69:46 Then We would have severed his life vein. 69:47 And none among you could have shielded him from it. 69:48 And truly it is a reminder for the reverent. 69:49 Truly We know that among you are those who deny. 69:50 It is indeed

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a source of regret for the disbelievers. 69:51 It is indeed the truth of certainty. 69:52 So glorify the Name of your Lord, the Magnificent.

"Who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God, or says, "It has been revealed unto me," though nothing has been revealed unto him, or one who says, "I will send down the like of what God has sent down." (6:93) (wa man aẓlamu min man iftarā 'alā Llāhi kadhiban aw qāla uḥiya ilayya wa lam yūḥa ilayhi shay'un wa man qāla sa-unzilu mithla mā anzala Llāh)

Viewed from a Quranic perspective, Izutsu's methodology could be seen as a way in which we better understand what it means that God never sends a messenger *"illā bi lisāni qawmihi li yubayyina lahum"* (14:4) and that the Quran was revealed *"bi lisānin 'arabiyyin mubīn"* (26:195; 16:103).