



A Methodological Study of “The Study Quran”



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Abstract

The Orientalists’ movement of Qur’ānic studies from the 11th century onwards has had three distinct periods; the first concentrated on the critique of the Qur’ān, the second one accompanied by a colonial and evangelical movement, and the third had a scientific mask. “The Study Qur’ān” in recent years by several American orientalists and edited by Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr in eight volumes as the first volume (including *Sūrat al-Ḥamd*, *Baqarah*, *Āl-‘Imrān*) has been translated into Persian and published is included in the third category.

The methodological critique of this work is discussed in this article. First, the strengths of this work, including the original English language [not translation] and its fluent translation and defense of the revelation of the Qur’ān, are expressed here, then dealt to criticize the principles, interpretive method, and mystical approach, as well as the authors’ positions on religious pluralism, diluting verses against Judaism and Christianity and darkening the verses of Ahl al-Bayt, the Shiite view and the miracle of the Qur’ān. Finally, this book has been considered as the cause of the abandonment of the Qur’ān in the current era, especially in Western societies.

Keywords: The Qur’an study, Orientalists, Interpretation, Contemporary, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

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Introduction

The main authors of the book 'The Study Quran' are two new Muslim American orientalist named "Maria Massi Dakake," "Joseph E.B. Lumbard" and an American-born Muslim named "Caner K. Dagli" and an American assistant editor named "Mohammad Rustom" accompanied them in completing this work. This Project was chosen and supervised by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

These four Islamic scholars under the supervision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr tried to collect the commentaries that have been written on the Qur'an throughout history. Then, they classified it into two categories: One is the interpretations that are preceded by fundamentalist Islam, and the other is the interpretations that are preceded by modernist Islam and religious intellectualism. This book covers forty interpretations of traditional Islam, with all interpretations of each verse checked and the most acceptable cases presented. So, this book is a selection of the interpretations from the point of view of these four collectors and surveyors. In this context, it is crucial to differentiate whether modernism and fundamentalism, as stated in the book's introduction, contradict Islamic principles. Additionally, we must evaluate if the importance of Quranic teachings aligns with the description provided in the verses or not. It's important to note that every verse in the Quran does not hold the same level of significance. A good exegesis should focus more on verses that offer crucial teachings. To ensure this, exegetes must fulfill certain conditions.

The Exegetes of the Book *The Study Quran*

One of the conditions for the authentic interpretation of the Qur'an is that the person interpreting the Qur'an must have certain conditions. Qur'an scholars have mentioned at least, ten conditions to be an exegete of the Qur'an (Riḍā'ī Isfahānī 2017, 2:112); the interpretation of the Qur'an by a person who does not possess the standard is one of the examples of interpretation by one's own opinion (*tafsīr bi rā'y*) (ibid, 2: 277-323). In numerous hadiths, it has been narrated from the Prophet that Whoever



interprets the Qur'an based on his personal opinion, his place is in hell³ (Baḥrānī, *al-Burhān*, 2010:16: Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mīzān*, 1999, 3:75, Tirmidhī, *Sunan Tirmidhī*, 2018, 5:199; Qurtubī, *Tafsīr Qurtubī*, 1997,1:27; Muttaqī Hindī, *Kānz al-'Ummāl*, 1992, 2:10). It is, therefore, necessary for the book to be reviewed by some Qur'ānic Scholars and exegetes in order to eliminate the risk of interpretation by one's own opinion.

The place of the book 'The Study Qur'ān' in the course of Orientalist Qur'ānic Studies

The first period of Orientalism starts after the Crusade war (around the 12th century), when the Orientalists wrote against the Qur'ān and the Prophet of Islam. However, they could not succeed in their attempt. The second phase of orientalism starts from the 17th to the 20th century; when evangelical orientalism was born and the efforts of orientalists to Christianize Islamic countries by making them Europeans' colonies. Nevertheless, they failed in this venture, too. The third period starts from the end of the 20th century wherein they accompanied by the scientific study of religion. In other words, a new era of soft war against the Qur'ān started (See; Zamānī, *Dawri-hāye īshtishrāq*, 2007).

One of the most important achievements of this period was the "Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān" published in the Netherlands and edited by McAuliffe (c.f. Riḍā'ī Isfahānī, "Investigation of Leiden Qur'anic encyclopedia", 2007) and also in 2009 "The Qur'ān: An Encyclopedia" edited by Oliver Lyman. (c.f. Riḍā'ī Isfahānī and I'tiṣāmī, Introduction and review of the "Quran: an Encyclopaedia" of Oliver Leman, 2009). The Peer-reviewed Journal "The Qur'an from Orientalists' Point of View" has reviewed these two works in more than a hundred articles, and now this is the third major work that has been produced by Western society in the

³. پیامبر ﷺ: «من فسر القرآن برأيه فليتبوء مقعده من النار».



Qur'ānic studies. However, the difference between this work and the two previous works is that this work has been developed by Muslims under the supervision of an Iranian scholar. Besides, the previous two works never claimed to be an interpretation or exegesis of the Qur'an.

The Positive Aspect of *The Study Quran*

In recent years, great interest has been seen in the Western world towards the Qur'an, especially in the United States of America. The frequent English translation and exegesis of the Qur'an have been noticed over there. This paves the opportunity for Muslims to introduce the Qur'an in the concerned society and let people know more about the Qur'an and its teachings.

The new entry of Muslims into the study of the Qur'an in the West and a religious look at the Qur'an is an initiative that, if anti-Islamic biased views are resolved, can produce useful results. Furthermore, the entry of Iranian Shiite scholars into the field of Qur'ānic studies, carried out by Orientalists, and the analytical study of their Qur'ānic works, will have a great impact on the Qur'ānic studies and the school of *Ahl al-Bayt*. This, however, needs a thorough rectification of the orientalist's biased views.

Defending the Qur'an as a revealed book is a positive phenomenon (*The Study Quran* 2015, 1:23). This is, however, an uncommon view among orientalist. Since, they consider the Qur'an to be man-made like the *Torāh* and the *Gospel*, and their view of revelation is similar to the concept of revelation in the Western culture, which does not consider that the words must be from God and be inspired by the Prophet, but the manifestation of God in the history and writings of Luke, Matthew, John, and Mark is considered as revelation. While in the Qur'ānic revelation both its content and words are from God, which was revealed by Gabriel to the Prophet of Islam, and man had no influence in its construction and interpretation. Therefore, the revelation of the Qur'an in Islamic culture (in the sense of divine content and words) is different from the concept of revelation in Western culture. Another beautiful feature of the book is the existence of



the glossary and index of hadiths and names at the end of the book which makes the contents of the book easy to find.

Weaknesses and Problems of *The Study Quran*

One proper research methodology has not been seen in this book and neither any research methodology has been mentioned nor a clear method is seen in the book. Sometimes, it uses the Qur'ān-by-Qur'ān exegetical method while in some places it uses the hadith-based method. In any case, it has not mentioned the hadiths narrated from the infallible Imams.

The Study Quran mentions forty Qur'ānic exegeses as a source of this book under the title “commentator key” (*The Study Quran* 2015, 1:60), but only about six of them are from amongst the Shi'ite exegetes while the rest of them are from Sunni school of thought. This has caused, firstly, the presence of Shi'ite exegesis to be less in such a manner that in some parts of the exegesis (like in the discussion of saying *ameen* in *Sūrāt al Ḥāmd*) only Sunni views (Qūrtūbī, Ibn Athīr) has been expressed (ibid, 1:79-80). This is contrary to the statement made by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the introduction of the book:

We selected the most authoritative and widely read and accepted traditional commentaries as well as specialized commentaries that offered important information not always available in those commentaries that are more widely read... our commentary is meant to take readers beyond the literal meaning of the text, when necessary, to clarify difficult passages, to reveal the inner meanings of the verses when called for, and provide a reasonable account of the diversity of views and interpretations in matters of law, theology, spirituality, and sacred history of put forth by various traditional Islamic authorities. (*The Study Quran* 2015, 1:47)

Secondly, some sources of Sunni exegeses, such as Ṭabarī's *Jāmī' al-Bāyān*, are full of Israelites and weak narrations, even the great scholars of Sunnis have criticized it, including Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh, who says



about Ṭabarī's exegesis, "he is crazy in narrating *ahadith*" (Rashīd Riḍā 1990, 3:298-9). This is despite the fact that this unreliable source is repeatedly cited in the Qur'an study.

Thirdly: some sources of interpretation that are mentioned as "key commentators" (*The Study Quran* 2015, 1:60) are inconspicuous and barely cited in the authentic Islamic resources. Such as the commentary *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān al-Mājīd* by Aḥmād b. 'Ujaybah (1224 AD) and in contrast to many important and reliable and famous Shiite commentaries such as the old hadith-based commentaries *Tafṣīr-i 'Ayāshī* by 'Āyashī, *Nūr al-Thaqalayn* by Ḥuwayzī, and also modern exegesis known as *Tafṣīr-i Tasnīm* by Ayatullāh Jawādī Āmulī and *Tafṣīr-i Nimūnih* by Ayatullāh Makārim Shīrāzī and also famous Sunni commentaries such as *Tafṣīr fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* by Sayyid Qūtb, *Al-Manār* by Rashīd Rīḍā and... have not been used. Therefore, seriously revising the above book's explanatory sources is necessary.

In the interpretation of the Quran, only the repeated recitation of the Muslims (which is inconsistent with the recitation of Ḥaḥṣ from 'Āṣim) can prove that a verse is from the Quran, and the other general readings are other than the Quran and cannot be considered as an authentic source of interpretation (Riḍā'i Isfahānī 2017, 1:377). While in "The Study Quran" frequent references have been made to non-consecutive readings as more accurate and authentic, for example, in the *tafṣīr* of *Sūrat al-Ḥāmd*, writes about the interpretation of "*Mālik Yawm al-dīn*": "it is also sometimes read *malik*, meaning 'king' or 'sovereign,' and both variants can be traced to the Prophet." Furthermore, it states, "Malik (King) is understood to be more intensive than malik (Master) since every king is a master, but not every master is a king" (*The Study Quran* 2015,1:72). This shows a deficiency in the said book and makes the need to rectify the reference to the Qur'an's reading more evident.

The Study Quran and its Contents

We may witness several dominant approaches in *The Study Quran*:



1. Defense of religious pluralism:

In this book, religious pluralism is defended and has been expressed in the sense of the righteousness and salvation of the followers of all religions, that is contrary to many verses of the Qur'an (such as the verses that introduce unbelievers as the people of hell, like verses 161-162 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, etc.).

This could be seen under verse 62 of *Sūrat al-Bāqarā*, where the author has endeavored to justify pluralism. In the commentary of verse 62 of *Sūrat al-Bāqarah*:

﴿إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالنَّصَارَى وَالصَّابِئِينَ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَ
عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ﴾

“Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve”
(The Qur'an, 2:62)

Firstly, the author deals with the meaning of ‘Sabeans, Christians and *hādū*’ and then quotes the statements of al-Qushayrī, Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazzālī and Al-Zamakhsharī and later takes the conclusion from al-Ghazzālī and says:

The theologian and mystic Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111), in his famous work *Fayṣal al-tafriqah*, argues that the “Christians of Byzantium” and the “Turks” (still outside the Islamic world at that time) would come under God’s Mercy;” additionally, it continues “Some argue that the verse refers to certain Jews, Christians, and Sabeans who adhered to these faiths before the Prophet’s mission, but who then acknowledged him when he came—people such as Salmān al-Fārsī, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, and the monks Waraqaḥ ibn Nawfal



and Baḥīrah (R); others have understood it to include Zoroastrians as well. (*The study Quran* 2015, pp. 123-124)

In this manner, we see how the author tries to justify religious pluralism. The Qur'an stands against religious Pluralism and introduces unbelievers as the people of hell, and many Islamic thinkers such as Martyr Muṭaharī in his famous book "Divine Justice," and contemporary Qur'anic exegetes like Ayātullah Jawādī Āmulī in his *Tafsīr-i Tasnīm* under the same verse 62 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah* have declared religious pluralism to be against the Qur'an. Some scholars have even written separate books on the subject like Qardān Qar'ā Malīkī and have discussed *ahadith* and given logical arguments as to why it is against the Qur'anic spirit.

2. Diminishing the verses against Jewish and Christian Beliefs in the Relevant Verses

For example, let us examine the verse 61 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*:

﴿وَإِذْ قُلْتُمْ يَا مُوسَىٰ لَنْ نَصْبِرَ عَلَىٰ طَعَامٍ وَاحِدٍ فَادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُخْرِجْ لَنَا مِمَّا تُنْبِتُ الْأَرْضُ مِنْ بَقْلِهَا وَقِثَّانِهَا وَفُومِهَا وَعَدَسِيهَا وَبَصِلِهَا قَالَ آتَسْتَبْدِلُونَ الَّذِي هُوَ أَدْنَىٰ بِالَّذِي هُوَ خَيْرٌ اهْبِطُوا مِصْرًا فَإِنَّ لَكُمْ مَا سَأَلْتُمْ وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الذَّلَّةُ وَالْمَسْكَنَةُ وَبَاءُوا بِغَضَبٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ النَّبِيِّينَ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ ذَلِكَ بِمَا عَصَوْا وَكَانُوا يَعْتَدُونَ﴾

“And when you said, ‘O Moses, we shall not endure one food, so call upon your Lord for us, that He may bring forth for us some of what the earth grows: its herbs, its cucumbers, its garlic, its lentils, its onions.’ He said, ‘Would you substitute what is lesser for what is better? Go down to a town, and you will have what you ask for.’ So, they were struck with abasement and poverty, and earned a burden of wrath from God. That is because they disbelieved in the signs of God, and killed the prophets without right. That is because they disobeyed, and were transgressors.”
(Quran 2:61)



The author of the commentary has written only one page of commentary under this great verse, which is all about food, the fall (*hubūt*), and Egypt. Only one sentence about the killing of the prophets by the Jews is given at the end of the discussion and says: “The killing of the prophets is also mentioned several times in the Bible” (*The Study Quran* 2015, 122).

Furthermore, under verses 85 and 86 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, the author does not mention any interpretation about the obscene acts of the Jews and their punishment (ibid,138), and under verse 55 of *Sūrat Āl’Imrān* that says:

﴿إِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يَا عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ خُذْ هَذَا الصَّلَافَ الَّذِي كَفَرُوا وَجَاعِلِ الَّذِينَ
اتَّبَعُوكَ فَوْقَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ ثُمَّ إِلَيَّ مَرْجِعُكُمْ فَأَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ فِيمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ
تَخْتَلِفُونَ﴾

“When He said, “O Jesus, I shall take thee and raise thee unto Me, and purify thee of those who disbelieved, and place those who followed thee above those who disbelieved, until the Day of Resurrection. Then unto Me is your return, and I shall judge between you concerning that wherein you used to differ.” (Quran 3:55)

The author says, “In the context of this verse, most assert, however, that it does not refer to being taken in death, but rather to being taken from the world, although others believe this does refer to God causing Jesus to die. Others say it refers to sleep...” (*The Study Quran* 2015, 312). In this manner, he leaves the reader confused about the ascension of Jesus.

3. Diminishing Shia beliefs or not Mentioning them

For example, in the last verse of *Sūrat al-Ḥamd*, which raises the topic of “*Āmīn*,” the author quotes Sunni views by explaining Ibn Kaṭhīr and Qūrtūbī, who consider saying Amen as obligatory or recommended. Contrary to this, there is neither any reference to the *ahadith* of *Ahl al-Bayt* nor any Shi’ite exegete or Jurist’s views, who clearly claim that saying



Amen is heresy and causes the prayer to be invalid. The author, while talking about the subject amen, says, "Upon the completion of the *Fātiḥah*, it is thus customary among Sunni Muslims to say *āmīn* after a brief moment of silence, which serves to distinguish this utterance from the Qur'ān itself. It is not considered obligatory but is reported to have been the tradition of the Prophet and is strongly recommended by Sunni scholars. Most understand *āmīn* to mean, 'O God! Answer us,' which functions as a supplication. Others say that it is one of the Names of God, while others say it means, 'Thus shall it be.' This last meaning is closest to the meaning of the Hebrew cognate 'Amen.' In this sense, it is a declaration of affirmation and is understood as the seal upon one's prayers" (ibid, 62). This clearly mentions the nature of the presentation of this book.

Another example is the verse 207 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah* that says:

﴿وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَشْرِي نَفْسَهُ ابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ رَءُوفٌ بِالْعِبَادِ﴾

"And among mankind is one who sells his soul seeking God's Good Pleasure, and God is Kind unto His servants." (Quran; 2:207)

The author under the commentary of the aforementioned verse says:

Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the second Caliph, commented on this verse, describing the *one who sells his soul* as "a man who sets out to enjoin right and forbid wrong and is slain." In this sense *sells his soul* can also mean "sells his life," since *nafs* can also mean "life" in addition to "soul" or "self." Others suggest that this verse may refer to those Companions of the Prophet who spent money on the emigration from Makkah to Madinah or who lost it by being forced to leave their wealth behind in Makkah when they migrated. (*The Study Quran* 2015, 210)



Furthermore, he says, “Some mention that this verse was connected with Ali’s act of sleeping in the Prophet’s bed while he migrated from Makkah for Madinah during the *hijrah* in order to buy time for the Prophet, who was a target of the Makkans’ hostility. In its more universal sense one *sells his soul* means that one gives away one’s selfish desires or one’s life for the sake of God, a virtuous bargain in the ultimate sense” (ibid, pp. 210-211). Here, anyone could notice how the author has ignored shi‘i exegetes’ views and does not point out shi‘i strong pieces of evidence on this particular verse. This is taking place despite the fact that the author is an Iranian Shia.

4. Diminishing the Miraculous Aspects of the Qur’ān

The author, under verse 23 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, talks about the miracles of the Qur’ān and says, “The *i‘jāz* (“inimitability” or “power to incapacitate [arguments against it]”) of the Qur’ān (a term not used in reference to the Qur’ān in the text itself) stems from its intrinsic beauty, clarity, eloquence, and levels of meaning” (ibid, 104). Here, we may witness how the author has presented a very narrow and limited meaning and aspects of miracles.

Since the book *The Study Quran* was written in the 21st century which is known as the era of science and technology, it was expected that the author would discuss the scientific miracles of the Qur’an in the fields of natural sciences and human sciences, which have been regarded very high in the contemporary world. The chief editor himself is preeminent in the said field, but despite all these, the dynamic and comprehensive miraculous aspects of the Qur’ān have been ignored.

Problems in the Approach (Abandonment of the Quran)

The Study Quran faces a fundamental issue with its approach, causing readers to lose interest in the Quran. Despite its alluring title, the commentary presents traditional and disorganized content that fails to establish a connection with contemporary human life. As a result, readers



find it difficult to engage with the Quran's excellent and life-creating content, instead viewing it as a historical text with the dry sayings of old commentators. This causes the Quran, a powerful force for societal transformation, to lose its impact and become increasingly overlooked in society. The authors of *The Study Quran* have committed an injustice to the Holy Quran, knowingly or unknowingly, and they themselves acknowledge this.

Conclusion

Many Muslim scholars and thinkers across various fields of Islamic sciences consider the Sunnah as one of the most reliable sources of knowledge about religion. It helps in understanding the meanings and purposes of the divine word. The validity of the Sunnah of the Prophet and the Ahl al-Bayt can be proven both rationally and by narration, and it is believed that the Islamic Ummah should follow them. It is noteworthy that despite the chief editor's Iranian Shia background, the aspect and ahadith from Ahl al-Bayt have received minimal attention. Furthermore, the paper presents Sunni perspectives on contentious topics, without acknowledging the Shia viewpoints laid out in the publication.

The book's attempt to justify certain perspectives deviates from the traditional approach of exegesis. It serves more as a platform for confirming doubts, rather than an innovative interpretation of the Quran. Several discussions lack the academic rigor expected, suggesting the supervisor did not have ample time to review and ensure the paper's adherence to scholarly standards.

Overall, *The Study Quran* represents a unique development in the field of Orientalist Quranic studies. While the involvement of Iranian contributors is notable, the work does exhibit both strengths and weaknesses. It is imperative that a revised edition be produced, incorporating necessary corrections and improvements.



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