

D I N A M I K A

ILMU

JURNAL PENDIDIKAN, KEISLAMAN DAN SOSIAL

NOTES ON THE ORIGINS AND METHODS
OF THE FIZHILAL AL-QUR'AN OF SAYYID QUTHB

Mhd. Syahnan

MORALITAS:

Analisa Medan Semantik Kata *Khuluq* dalam Al-qur'an

Iskandar

ISLAM DAN MODERNISASI:

Menengok Akar Sejarah Pembaharuan Islam

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M. Abdzar D

IBN TAYMIYYAH VERSUS TASAWWUF:

Sebuah Telaah Atas Kritik

Adib

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JURNAL PENDIDIKAN, KEISLAMAN DAN SOSIAL



PENGANTAR REDAKSI

Sejak awal penerbitan, Jurnal Dinamika Ilmu menyajikan berbagai artikel aktual meliputi kajian kependidikan, keislaman dan kemasyarakatan. Mulai edisi Juni 2001 terdapat perkembangan baru dalam teknik penyajian artikel-artikel tersebut, dimana masing-masing kajian diterbitkan secara bergantian dalam setiap edisi. Untuk edisi Desember 2001 ini, Dinamika Ilmu menyajikan artikel-artikel kesilaman.

Syahnan dalam artikelnya yang berjudul "Notes on The Origins and Methods of The Fî Dhilâl al-Qur'an of Sayyid Quthb" mengangkat sosok mufassir modern Sayyid Quthb. Sayyid Quthb tergolong mufassir yang dalam berbagai penafsirannya konsisten mempertahankan dasar-dasar fundamental syari'at Islam sebagai jalan keluar. Ia telah berhasil mengintegrasikan pesan-pesan Ilahiyah ke dalam situasi kehidupan umat manusia di era sekarang ini. Dalam hal ini Syahnan mencoba memberikan berbagai catatan atas penafsirannya dalam Fî Dhilâl al-Qur'ân. Masih dalam topik yang sama, yaitu tafsir, Iskandar mengangkat sebuah kajian tafsir tematik tentang akhlak. Sebagai landasan moral dan etik dalam kehidupan umat manusia, adalah strategis jika pembahasan tentang moralitas dikaji langsung lewat ayat-ayat al-Qur'an. Dalam hal ini Iskandar mencoba menganalisa secara semantik kata akhlak dalam al-Qur'an.

Pada bagian lain Zurqoni mengangkat issue modernisasi dalam rentangan sejarah Islam. Gerakan pembaharuan merupakan upaya untuk melakukan perubahan pola

pikir praktek keislaman yang dianggap telah menyimpang dari ajaran yang sesungguhnya disamping juga merupakan upaya menyesuaikan dengan perkembangan zaman. Masih dalam topik pembaharuan, Bambang Iswanto mengangkat issue tentang metodologi dan pendekatan pembaharuan hukum Islam. Stagnasi perkembangan hukum Islam menurutnya hanya dapat diatasi melalui sistem dan metodologi yang komprehensif, yaitu melalui kajian langsung terhadap al-qur'an dan Sunnah.

Sebuah analisa tentang perbedaan perspektif Barat dan Islam diangkat oleh Abdul Munir. Dalam hal ini ia mencoba membandingkan tentang konsep perkembangan berfikir manusia menurut Barat dan Islam. Menurut Islam, pengalaman empiris bukanlah satu-satunya sumber pengetahuan. Karena di dalamnya terdapat sumber pengetahuan lain yang lebih besar yaitu wahyu. Sedangkan dalam bidang tasawwuf terdapat dua artikel yang masing-masing diangkat oleh Abdzar dan Adib. Yang pertama mengangkat konsep Insan Kamil dan Nur Muhammad al-Jilli. Konsep Insan Kamil pertama kali dikembangkan oleh Ibn 'Araby, namun kemudian disempurnakan lebih lanjut oleh al-Jilli. Sedangkan yang kedua mengangkat Kritik Ibn Taymiyyah terhadap tasawwuf. Kritiknya yang tajam terhadap tasawwuf membuatnya diklaim oleh sementara orang sebagai anti tasawwuf. Dalam hal ini Adib mencoba mengajukan beberapa telaah atas kritik Ibn Taymiyyah terhadap tasawwuf yang dinilai kurang proporsional.

-----, *Khasha'ish al-Tashawwur al-Islami wa Muqawwimatuh*. Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al- 'Arabiyya, 1962.

-----, *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*. First edition, Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, [1953- ?] 30 vols. in 5; fourth edition, Beirut: Dar al-'Arabiyya li al-Thiba'a wa al-Nasyr wa al-Tawzi', n.d., 30 vols. in 8; revised edition, Beirut: Dar al-Syuruq, 1974, 30 vols. In 6.

Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*
Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica

NOTES ON THE ORIGINS AND METHODS OF THE *FI ZHILAL AL-QUR'AN* OF SAYYID QUTHB

Mhd. Syahnan*

تجريد البحث: ومن الالتزام أن عملية التفسير تتحرك مبتدئاً من النصوص القرآنية مع استعمال العلوم الملتزمة لاستخراج وضوح معنى الآية. وإن في ظلال القرآن هو من إحدى التفسير الحديثة الممثلة التي تصور عن الأحوال الاجتماعية المعاصرة وتستعمل الآية القرآنية كالمبدأ في تفسيرها ولا تستعمل غيرها من الأقوال العلماء القديمة. وقد أثبت الشهيد سيد قطب أن لكتاب الله مناسبة واضحة مع التحديات المعاصرة. وهذه المقالة تبحث عن الأحوال الموجودة عند ظهور في ظلال القرآن وعن الطريقة المستعملة فيها.

Abstract. Adalah merupakan suatu kelaziman bahwa *tafsir* selalu menjadikan teks al-Qur'an sebagai *starting poin*-nya, mengkaji secara cermat teks tersebut dengan menggunakan berbagai ilmu penunjang dalam rangka untuk mencari penjelasan makna sesuatu ayat. *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an* karya Sayyid Quthb adalah contoh tipe tertentu penafsiran Qur'an modern. Apakah secara eksplisit ataupun implisit, karya tersebut menggambarkan situasi Islam pada abad modern, yang menjadikan Kitab Suci sebagai landasan berpijak, dan bukan berdasarkan penafsiran atau komentar-komentar para ulama masa lalu. Lebih jauh, diseluruh tafsirnya, Sayyid Quthb meyakini bahwa Kitab Suci memiliki relevansi langsung dengan tantangan dan isu-isu kontemporer. Artikel ini akan menganalisis latarbelakang munculnya *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*, yang meliputi penulisan terhadap kondisi sosial, politik dan psikologis penulisnya. Metodologi yang diaplikasikan dalam karya ini juga akan didiskusikan.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one reason for the continuing legacy of Sayyid Quthb Ibrahim Husayn al-Shadhili (1906-1966) (there after Quthb) is the profound and masterful integration of the Qur'an in his thought. Written for the most part during the author's imprisonment (between 1954-

1964), Quthb's work is a direct successor to that of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rasyid Ridha. In fact, it adopts 'Abduh's methods in both explicit and implicit interpretations. However, Quthb differed from his predecessors in the degree to which he was willing to accept compromise within a socio-cultural and

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anti-imperialist discourse, in his effort to revive a Qur'anically based "Islamic system" (*al-nizham al-Islami*). This paper is an attempt to analyze numerous aspects of *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*, Beginning with an analysis of Quthb's renewed interest in the Qur'an, and taking into account his basic principles of Qur'anic interpretation, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that Quthb's theoretical reflections gained new significance with the passage of time. Moreover, this examination of Quthb's work will try to integrate the contemporary historical context with the autonomy of the *tafsir* itself.

BACKGROUND TO THE WRITING OF *FI ZHILAL AL-QUR'AN*

Sayyid Quthb's Rediscovery of the Qur'an

Quthb's interest in the Qur'an started at an early stage of his life and grew throughout his intellectual career, which spanned a period of at least thirty four years. During this period, he lived in the shadow of two distinct political regimes, namely, the monarchy, and 'Abd al-Nasir's regime, each of which had a unique relationship with Western colonialism. However, before delving into Quthb's career as a *mufasssir*, it is necessary to examine the factors that inspired his interest in the Qur'an and the orientation which this interest had followed. Calvert maintains that "Quthb's literary studies of the Qur'an not only mark the high point of his career as a critic, they also presage his future commitment to the Islamic cause which by the time of his active involvement in the late 1940s, was in full and brilliant

bloom."¹ Quthb's early interest in Qur'anic imagery can be clearly seen in his "Al-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an al-Karim," which appeared in the scholarly journal, *al-Muqtathaf* in 1939,² and in which he examines the literary and aesthetic aspects of the Qur'an. The ideas in this article were later fully expanded in a book bearing the same title and published in 1944.³ This book has been regarded as the foundation of his Qur'anic studies, and as having had a significant impact on the *Zhilal*.⁴ This early interest in the Qur'an may have been sparked by the Qur'anic recitals he had listened to as a child with his family during the month of Ramadhan.⁵ Indeed, these recitals so moved the young Quthb that despite his incomplete understanding of the Qur'anic text at this stage, certain

¹John Calvert, "Discourse, Community and Power: Sayyid Quthb and the Islamic Movement in Egypt." (Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 1993), hlm. 117.

²See "Al-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an al-Karim," *al-Muqtathaf* 94, no. 2 (February 1939): 206-222, and (March 1939): 313-318.

³The edition I use here is *Al-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an* (n.p., 1966).

⁴Yusuf al-'Azham, *Ra'id al-Fikr al-Islami al-Mu'ashir: al-Shahid Sayyid Quthb, Hayatuh wa Madrasatuh wa Atsaruh* (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 1980), 246. This is reflected in numerous references to the *Tashwir*, as in his commentary on *surat al-Baqara* in the *Zhilal*, vol. 1 (Beirut, 1973), 28, 46, 55, 65, 71, 80, 286, 290, 293.

⁵The role that his family, particularly his mother played, in nurturing his deep interest in the Qur'an may be gleaned from his "dedication" of the *Tashwir* to his mother.

parts of it left a deep impression on his imagination due to the richness of their imagery and the personal association. Later on, when he moved to Cairo to pursue his studies, the pleasant, simple and moving Qur'an of his childhood was transformed into a difficult, complex and broken Qur'an as a result of reading Qur'anic commentaries. Therefore, in an effort to recapture or perhaps understand the magical effect of his earliest encounters with the Qur'an, Quthb decided to delve deeper into it and write his own commentary on it. In the introduction to his *Tashwir*, Quthb explained his method and his hopes for his book. He hoped to become a competent *mufassir*, capable of expounding the aim and objective of the holy Qur'an, as well as enabling others to appreciate the beauty of the Holy Book through his *ta'wil*. What Quthb did not know is that his work would later assume more importance than he had ever imagined and that he himself would come to symbolize "the new school of Qur'anic interpretation."⁶

The concept of Qur'anic inimitability (*i'jaz*) looms large in the *Tashwir*. However, it was not the validity of *i'jaz* that Quthb sought to prove and elaborate, but the aesthetic aspects of the Qur'an that partake of artistic considerations regardless of their religious value.⁷ In

addition, he attempted to keep his method of interpretation free from linguistic, syntactic, juristic, or historical connotations, as had previously been the custom. Moreover, he maintained that by delving into such issues, scholars have added little to the discussion of *i'jaz* and the proper analysis of the Qur'an.⁸

Quthb argued that the Qur'an's charm (*sihr*) lies in its harmonious and integral thesis. The Qur'an's cohesiveness comes neither from its historical narrations nor from the sequencing of its chapters, but rather from the sensitivity of the Qur'anic discourse, represented in its use of images and tones and its employment of psychological and spiritual shades to imprint the message and views that are integral to its 'artistic inimitability' (*al-i'jaz al-fanni*).⁹ To support this thesis, Quthb cited the stories of 'Umar ibn al-Khaththab and al-Walid ibn al-Mughirah, both of whom were overwhelmed by the charm of the Qur'an, although from contrasting perspectives. However, he also conceded that the early converts accepted Islam for a variety of reasons besides the charm of the Qur'an. These reasons included the charismatic personality of the Prophet, the patience

of the text; see Yusuf al-'Azhm, *Ra'id al-Fikr al-Islami al-Mu'ashir al-Shahid Sayyid Quthb* (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 1980), 247. Nonetheless, *Tashwir* is still considered the foundation of Quthb's Qur'anic studies and the precursor to *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*.

⁸For a detailed account on how the Qur'an should be approached, see generally *al-Tashwir*, 24-33.

⁹Sayyid Quthb, "al-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an al-Karim," *al-Muqtathaf* 94, no. 2 (February 1939): 206, 207.

⁶Shalah al-Khalidi, *Madkhal ila Zhilal al-Qur'an*, 221; cf. Muhammad ibn Dulaym al-Qahthani, *Sayyid Quthb* (Riyad: Dar Thiba, 1993), 22.

⁷Quthb's preoccupation with the purely artistic features of the Qur'an was criticized by Hasan al-Banna' (1906-1949) who accused him of ignoring the religious aspects

and sacrifice undertaken by Muslims, and the tolerance of the *syari'ah*, to mention but a few. Nonetheless, he argued that the Qur'an itself was a decisive factor in bewitching the pagans and making them accept Islam.¹⁰

Quthb's Artistic Expression Of The Qur'an

In his discussion of the Qur'an's artistry, Quthb asserted that the most prominent device of the Qur'anic style is portrayal: "It is an established method, a comprehensive characteristic, using variations in colour, movement, tone and sound, ..." ¹¹ This device is also aided by a plethora of expressions that help magnify the imagery and make it lively and humane. To support this claim, Quthb offered extensive examples from the Qur'an such as Q. 7: 40, in which the impossibility of a non-believer's entering heaven is equated with the impossibility for a camel of passing through a needle's eye (... "the gates of heaven shall not be opened to them, nor shall they enter Paradise until the camel passes through the eye of the needle. Even so We recompense the sinners"). ¹²

Furthermore, Quthb argued that sensual dramatization and corporeal representation (*al-takhyil al-hissi wa al-tajsim*) were two important methods forming the foundation of Qur'anic

portrayal, for example, in Q. 81: 18, "*wa al-shubhi idha tanaffas*" (by the dawn sighing), where the human quality of breathing is ascribed to the morning, thus endowing it with the myriad meanings and states that are usually attributed to the morning. Similarly, Quthb maintained that the anthropomorphic expressions of the Qur'an like "He sat on the throne," "His throne on the water," and "The Hand of Allah is above their hands," are examples of dramatization and corporeal representation, designed to clarify abstract meanings.

Quthb believed that the repetitious parts of the Qur'anic narrative are subordinate to its religious message. Likewise, he explained that the tales in the Qur'an are treated in a variety of ways. Some, like those of Yusuf, Ibrahim and Sulayman are examined at length, while others such as those of Zakariyya, Shu'ayb and Shalih are treated rather briefly. In addition, some tales are either presented in their entirety, such as the tale concerning the birth of Jesus, while others are initiated at a later stage, like the story of Yusuf.¹³

Another aspect that constitutes representation in Quthb's scheme, is the artistic harmony (*al-tanasuq al-fanni*) of the Qur'an. He held that musical rhythms and harmonious patterns perform a fundamental harmonizing task in the rhetoric of the Qur'an. A case in point is Qur'an, *sura* 53.

Also, incorporated into Quthb's scheme of artistic harmony is the portrayal by the Qur'an of the Day of Resurrection, in which he discovered a certain symmetry and affinity between

¹⁰Sayyid Quthb, *al-Tashwir*, 18; Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 104-105.

¹¹Boullata, "The Rhetorical," 151; Sayyid Quthb, *al-Tashwir*, 34-35.

¹²*Ibid.*, 36.

¹³Sayyid Quthb, *al-Tashwir*, 134-139.

expressions used in some scenes and the underlying rhythm and music of the words. The Qur'anic imagery and discourse in these scenes deal with death, resurrection, happiness and suffering, in breathlessly rapid portrayals which reflect the calamity of the day. Moreover, the Qur'anic representation of bodily resurrection at the end of time etches a deep and haunting impact on the mind. He proves this through an exploration of the thoroughness of the imagery and the purity of the conception of the Qur'an.

The novelty of Quthb's literary Qur'anic study has been much debated amongst scholars. One such is 'A'ishah 'Abd Rahman (Bint al-Shathi'), who has argued that studies such as his had previously been undertaken at Cairo University.¹⁴ In addition, it has been claimed that the genesis of the idea of a "*tashwir fanni*" can be traced back to al-'Aqqad.¹⁵ Regarding the first accusation, Quthb responded by requesting the names, if any, of such works, and maintaining that the alleged presence of such works is erroneous and contrary to the facts.¹⁶ As for the second allegation, it appears to have been baseless for

'Aqqad had no idea concerning what was ascribed to him. Moreover, a closer examination of the latter's *al-Wudhuh wa al-Ghumudh fi al-Asalib al-Shi'riyya* shows no indication of such claims. Thus one may conclude that Quthb was not a follower of anyone in this endeavor.¹⁷

Quthb employed the views articulated in *Tashwir* in his second major, literary-oriented Qur'anic work, *Masyahid al-Qiyama fi al-Qur'an*, in 1947. This book deals specifically with the verses of the Qur'an that relate to the scenes of the resurrection. While it is conceivable that Quthb's rediscovery of the Qur'an was closely related to the transformation of the Egyptian nationalist discourse during the 1930s and 1940s,¹⁸ internal factors must have also contributed to his growing fascination and attachment to the Qur'an. Musallam maintains that there are at least three reasons for Quthb's renewed interest, all of which appear to have arisen from personal reasons. They are the death of his mother, his shattered love affair and his failing health.¹⁹ Accordingly, Quthb's analysis and study of the Qur'an was not

¹⁴ Abd Allah 'Awadh 'Abd al-Khabbash, *Sayyid Quthb al-Adib al-Naqid* (Amman: Maktabat al-Manar, 1983), 307.

¹⁵ Sayyid Basyir Ahmad Kashmiri, *'Abqari al-Islam Sayyid Quthb: al-Adib al-'Imlaq wa al-Mujaddid al-Mulham* (Cairo: Dar al-Fadhila, 1994), 298.

¹⁶ Sayyid Quthb, "Mabahith 'an al-Tashwir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an," *al-Risala* 620 (1945): 529; cf. al-Khabbash, *Sayyid Quthb*, 307; see also Kashmiri, *'Abqari al-Islam*, 298-99.

¹⁷ See Shalah 'Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi, *Nazhariyyat al-Tashwir al-Fanni 'ind Sayyid Quthb*, 122, 126, 368. In the previous chapter I indicated why Quthb, as an admirer of 'Aqqad, later struck his own course; see *supra*, p. 8.

¹⁸ See, *inter alia*, Calvert, "Discourse," 123.

¹⁹ For further details see Adnan Ayyub Musallam, "The Formative Stages of Sayyid Quthb's Intellectual Career and His Emergence as an Islamic Da'iyah" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1983), 147-154.

a mere "intellectual and psychological luxury", as he declared, but was apparently a psychological and spiritual necessity.

By analyzing Sayyid Quthb's long intellectual career, one witnesses a systematic transformation in his literary interests, philosophical arguments, and religious objectives. It is clear, however, that his main objective in writing the *Zhilal* was not to elevate Arabic literary criticism to the status of a discipline, or to relegate Qur'anic studies to a mere hermeneutical field, but to utilize the religious text in the fulfillment of certain objectives. "In general, what one witnesses is an overall shift in emphasis from the literary and aesthetic forms of expression to the social and ideological dimension of Islam in his writing."²⁰

Moreover, in accordance with the basic arguments of modernist Muslim exegetes like Muhammad 'Abduh and Rasyid Ridha, Sayyid Quthb pursued the double intention of interpreting the Qur'an as the sacred text par excellence, as well as advancing his religious claims and views which conflicted with those of his contemporaries to a large extent.²¹ It must also be remembered that Quthb, during the 1950s and 60s, was the main ideologue of the *Ikhwan* and that the Qur'an was used, to some extent, to supply an affirmation and an impetus to Quthb's ideology.

The Origin Of The Zhilal

The *Zhilal* first appeared in the scientific journal *al-Risala*, in the form of

serial articles. These articles were all entitled *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*, and started to appear in February 1952 when Quthb published his first article in the third issue of that month. He continued producing writing articles for the next seven issues until the termination of the magazine's publication was announced. *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an* was then published separately in 30 consecutive volumes, each of which was issued at the beginning of the month by Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya li 'Isa al-Halabi wa Shurakah.²² The publication of all 30 volumes spanned a period of more than two years. Indeed, the first volume appeared in October 1952 and the last by the end of 1954. From January to March of 1953, Quthb was in detention but nevertheless managed to write volumes 17 and 18 during that period.

The prison authorities allowed Quthb to continue his work on the commentary in order to fulfill his contractual obligation to the publishing house. This concession was the direct result of the publisher's successful challenge to the government in the courts for the losses he had incurred during Quthb's imprisonment in 1954. Nevertheless, the government formed a censorship committee to screen Quthb's writings. Moreover, upon completion of his oeuvre in 1959, Quthb began major revisions of the earlier sections of his commentary so as to make it reflect his new Islamic conception in light of the 1954 disaster which befell the Muslim Brothers as well as his own experience in 'Abd al-Nashir's prisons. After completing the revision of the first thirteen parts, they

²⁰Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi', *Intellectual Origins*, 169.

²¹Ibid.

²²*Al-Muslimun* 9 (1952): 15.

were reprinted in the third edition of his commentary in 1961.²³

QUTHB'S METHOD OF QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATION

Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an, is not a commentary in the traditional sense. Instead, it is a free expression of the author's feelings while reading the Qur'anic verses. Quthb's earlier subjective spiritual experiences, and especially his quest for an infinite, which could never be expressed in finite and objective mediums, became entrenched in his literary philosophy. In analyzing Quthb's method of Qur'anic exegesis, an effort will be made to take into account both the purely historical context contemporaneous with the writing of this work as well as the autonomy of the *Zhilal*.²⁴ The historical context, however, has been partially alluded to in the previous chapter. The following factors will also be taken into account, namely, the semantics of Quthb's exegesis and the relationship of semantics to the cultural and political environment.

²³ Al-'Azham, 251; al-Khalidi, 241-244; al-Shaththi, 18; and also Barakat, 15, 19. Further examination of the revision of the *Zhilal* will be discussed in Chapter Three, below.

²⁴ The question of method in the *Zhilal*, within its historical context, has been discussed by Abu Rabi' in his *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 167-208; see also Olivier Carré, *Mystique et politique: lecture révolutionnaire du Coran par Sayyid Quthb, frère musulman radical* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1984), 31-73.

In explaining his method of Qur'anic interpretation,²⁵ Quthb declares the first step to be an active search within the Qur'an for its meanings. In this respect, his view is akin to that of other *mufasssirs* who maintain that the Qur'an explains itself by itself (*yufasssiru ba'dhuha ba'dha*).²⁶ Accordingly, he believed that the Qur'an is the primary reference point for every single matter, and that it should not be twisted in order to conform to contemporary principles or explanations. Rather, our understanding of the Qur'an should conform to the Qur'an's statements, not vice versa. Moreover, Quthb contends that it is God's prerogative to determine and interpret the religion of Islam as He wishes. This stand goes along way towards explaining the nature of his straightforward method in *tafsir*, and its lack of dependence on *ta'wil* and *tafiq*.²⁷ In addition, Quthb

²⁵ Since Quthb did not write a special book on the methodology of Qur'anic exegesis, this study is based on observation of his *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*, as well as his other works.

²⁶ All prominent Muslim exegetes are in agreement with this principle. Later, modern Muslim scholars such as 'A'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman and Fazlur Rahman were to argue that this method is the only valid way of interpreting the Qur'an. See the former's *Tafsir al-Bayani*, Vol. 1 (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1962), 9-10.

²⁷ Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, vol. 3, 1518-9; cf. Sayyid Basyir Ahmad Kasymiri, *'Abqari al-Islam*, 341. Quthb's commitment to the Qur'anic text resulted in allegations of his radicalism. The radicalism of *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*, however, implies interpreting the Qur'an according to the language and the style of that text and

utilizes Prophetic traditions but only in a secondary, subservient manner. Prophetic traditions, he argues, embody elements of orientation and magnificent methodological refinement. However, he refrains from using weak traditions except on very limited occasions,²⁸ and only when the nature of the issue at hand requires it. Examples of his reluctance to use such traditions can be illustrated in his attitude towards the story of the two angels, Harut and Marut, who were sent to Babil. This story and others like it, he says, were known to both Arabs and Jews when the Qur'an appeared. Hence, the Qur'an speaks of them in general terms (*ijmal*) and briefly mentions them in order to convey a certain message or fulfill a certain objective. They are not elaborated in great detail because the Prophet's contemporaries already knew them. Accordingly, Quthb refrained from incorporating ancient legends like this one into his interpretation since no single

tradition confirmed their reliability or authenticity.²⁹

Quthb is also critical of sound narratives in which the *matn* (content) contradicts reason. An example in this regard is his interpretation of Qur'an, 72: 1, which mentions stories about the *jinn*. Despite the plethora of traditions circulating around this verse, Quthb avoids them and uses the traditions ascribed to Ibn 'Abbas instead, arguing that they fit better the Qur'anic text "*Qul uhiya ilayya annahu stama'a nafarun mina l-jinni ...*" (Say: It has been revealed to me that a company of the *jinn* gave ear, ...). Hence, based on these traditions, Quthb concluded that the Prophet was informed of the occurrence through revelation; and that he neither saw the *jinn* nor communicated with them. In addition, this tradition is the most reliable in terms of its chain of transmission and deduction.³⁰ Although Quthb

acknowledged that these traditions had been accepted since the very beginning by a number of classical scholars,³¹ they were still doubtful because they emphasized the infallibility of prophecy and safeguarded discussions of mockery and distortion, which the context of the *sura* totally negated. At the same time

none other. 'Abd Allah Shahatah also argued that Quthb's offense was that he provoked Islamic thought from within the Qur'an. See Ahmad Shubul, "Thariqa Jadida li Tafsir al-Qur'an wa Dirasatuh Safara Sayyid Quthb," *al-Ahram* 20 (1984): 15.

²⁸This is clearly stated in his *Zhilal*, Dar al-Shuruq edition, vol. 3, 1598. The *Zhilal*'s use of Prophetic traditions appears to gain more and more attention from researchers. The most recent ones to do so are Abu 'A'ish 'Abd al-Mun'im Ibrahim and Abu Hudhaifa Muhammad Ibrahim, *Fath Dhi al-Jalal Fi Takhrij Ahadith al-Zhilal* (Riyad: Maktabat Nizar Mushthafa al-Baz, 1995) in two volumes, not only gathers the prophetic traditions used in the *Zhilal* but also analyses them as well as assesses their reliability.

²⁹Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, vol. 1, 97.

³⁰Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, vol. 6, 3273. It was also used in the *Thabaqat* of Ibn Sa'd and *Tarikh* of Ibn Jarir al-Thabari under the name *hadith al-gharaniq* (the exalted maidens), albeit with minor lexical differences.

³¹For instance, see al-Thabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Vol. 17 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1987), 131-3.

they weakened the faith of the unbelievers in the gods and the fables surrounding them. Thus, Quthb concluded that it was advisable not to incorporate these two stories into the commentary on the *sura*.

Quthb also frequently discusses the phenomena surrounding given instances of revelation, or the *asbab al-nuzul*, explicitly stating that it is necessary to take into account the situation, including the context, circumstances and factual exigencies, in which each verse was revealed. This feature is even more clear in Quthb's introduction to the *suras* which begin with *asbab al-nuzul*, particularly in the revised editions.³² In addition to stressing the importance of the circumstances of revelation, Quthb also adheres closely to the text, offering his complete consent to its literal meanings.

When dealing with the legal verses of the Qur'an, Quthb is not very much interested in analysing their juridical function. In fact, Quthb often directs the reader to consult books on *fiqh* for these.³³

³²Khalidi, *Zhilal al-Qur'an fi al-Mizan*, 332-338.

³³See, *inter alia*, Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, vol. 3, 1518-9; cf. Kasymiri, 'Abqari al-Islam, 341. For a detailed account of Quthb's view pertaining to *shari'a* and *fiqh* see, *inter alia*, Olivier Carré, *Mystique*, 191-212; and idem, "Le Combat pour Dieu et l'Etat islamique chez Sayyid Quthb, l'inspirateur du radicalisme actuel" *Revue française de science politique* 33, 4 (1983): 696-8; Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi', *Intellectual Origins*, 196-8.

The ambiguous verses (*ayat mutasyabihat*) also proved to be a controversial issue among the *mufasssirs*. This issue has its roots in the Qur'anic passage stating that God revealed to Muhammad verses which were either perspicuous (*muhkamat*) and therefore of a fundamental nature, or ambiguous (*mutasyabihat*). In approaching the ambiguous verses, Quthb, in contrast to most exegetes, did not plunge into philosophical or logical discussions but restricted himself to the central narrative of the Qur'an. Nor did he seek the aid of explanatory *hadiths*, unless a *hadith* sound in both its transmission and content was available. He believed that the literal meaning of the text was sufficient for an adequate understanding of the text. Similarly, he believed that all efforts to fully explain the *mutasyabihat* verses and unlock their mystery would prove futile and would constitute a violation of the *nash*, which purposely gave no detailed explanation of them.³⁴

The best example of his use of this method can be seen in his interpretation of Q. 2: 29 "then He lifted Himself to heaven." Interpolating the interpretation with theological dialectic, Quthb argues, is a distortion of both the beauty of faith and the Qur'an.³⁵

³⁴Quthb's position in this regard is similar to that of his predecessor, 'Abduh. See al-Dhahabi, *al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirun*, vol. 3, 226.

³⁵Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, vol. 1, 53-4; for a fair treatment of Quthb's view on the ambiguous verses, especially concerning the attributes of God, see Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrawi, *Al-Mufasssirun*:

Quthb's attitude towards *Isra'iliyyat*, in contrast to that of most previous *mufasssirs*,³⁶ resembles his view on the ambiguous verses (*mutashabihat*). Indeed, he maintains that the literal meaning of the text suffices to convey the message. He also held that these fables and ancient stories lead to deviation in Muslim thought because there is no sound tradition or Qur'anic reference that supports their validity. Therefore, it is inconceivable that the *Isra'iliyyat* should be taken into account. In addition, he argued that many commentators, including al-Thabari and Ibn Kathir, erred in placing their faith in these tales.³⁷

Sayyid Quthb's Qur'anic Hermeneutics

Although Quthb wrote a Qur'anic exegesis, and several short works on Qur'anic topics, he never devoted an entire work to Qur'anic hermeneutics

Bayn al-Ta'wil wa al-Itsbat Fi Ayat al-Shifat, vol. 2 (Riyad: Dar Thiba, 1985), 319-332.

³⁶For instance, Ibn Taymiyya distinguished between three types of Judaeo-Christian tales, namely, those which confirm the truth, those contrary to the tenets of Islam, and those whose soundness or unsoundness are doubtful. He affirmed that the *Isra'iliyyat* traditions of the first and third categories may be used in *tafsir* as a means of assisting the *mufasssir* in making a point. See his *Muqaddima fi Ushul al-Tafsir* (Kuwait: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1971), 55-7, 98-101; see also Shabri al-Mutawalli, *Manhaj Ibn Taymiyya fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim* (Cairo: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1981), 68.

³⁷Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, vol. 1, 299; vol. 2, 875; vol. 3, 1358, 1359; vol. 4, 1881.

per se. What follows is therefore an extrapolation of the ideas included in a chapter of his *Ma'alim fi al-Thariq*, entitled *Jilun Qur'aniyyun Farid* (A Unique Qur'anic Generation), which presents the most important tenets of Quthb's approach to Qur'anic exegesis.

The Prophet's message, Quthb observes, produced a generation of people unique in the history of humanity. Accordingly, it is the *mufasssir's* task to find the "secret" of this committed generation of people and their exemplary Islamic way of life, and this in order to mobilize a similar generation of youth capable of upholding Islamic ideas in the modern world. Such a quest, however, inevitably faced the question of why contemporary Muslims, possessing both the Qur'an and the teachings of Muhammad, do not demonstrate the same piety and religious fervor as the Prophet's Companions. Quthb points out that the reason for such failure cannot have been the death of Muhammad, as Islam is a universal religion valid for all time, not dependant on a mortal human being, whatever his status for its survival.

Quthb believed that the inspiration behind the exceptional generation of Muslims lies in the nature of the source or font (*nab'*) that inspired them: the pristine and undiluted Qur'an of yore; not the Qur'an as Muslims now know it, but rather the Qur'an unencumbered by centuries of interpreters. This Qur'an was so magnificent and powerful, he claims, that even Muhammad's life was simply a trace of it.

The System Employed In The *Zhilal*

It has been stated that the *Zhilal* is not a *tafsir* in the traditional sense,³⁸ even though it loosely adheres to the traditional medieval format. Moreover, a close study of the work reveals that it provides for every verse or group of verses a commentary divided into at least three main sections, namely, an introduction, revelation, and an expansion of the text.

In his analysis of the verses, he starts by highlighting the important features of the *suras*, as well as determining the foremost lines and principles, *nukat*, of the verses. *Sura* by *sura* and verse by verse, covering several thousand pages, Quthb outlines his understanding of the Qur'an in order to build a theory of, and a practical program for, modern Islam. He next explains the correlation and the application of the verses to real life. In addition, he often resorts to evidence furnished by transmitters of *hadits* and exegetes regarding the circumstances and history of the revelation in order to explain further the narratives. Nevertheless, his handling of reports and statements from prominent books of *hadits*, *tafsir* and *tarikh* is rather inconsistent, and perhaps not analytical enough in discriminating between sound and forged reports. However, Quthb utilized diverse sources in the belief that these reports would undoubtedly support and explain each other, thus throwing

more light on the context and meaning of the verses. By placing the verses in the context they were revealed in, Quthb argues, the reader would obtain a greater sense of their reality and their applicability to real life.³⁹

Quthb affirmed the unity of the different components of each *sura* of the Qur'an. He criticized especially scholars who claimed that individual sections of each *sura* of the Qur'an could stand on their own, and who cited the example of how on one occasion the Qur'an speaks about the Prophet and his Companions, on another it provides stories and ancient tales, and on yet other occasion it discusses specific legal matters.⁴⁰

Quthb's exposition of *surat al-Isra'* is perhaps the best example of this unity. This Meccan *sura* starts with a glorification of God (*subhana llah*) and ends with praise to God (*al-hamdu li llah*). Although comprising manifold topics, it focuses on doctrine (*'aqida*). It also deals with etiquette appropriate to both individual and community life, a description of the children of Israel and a discussion of their connection to the Aqsa mosque as the destination of the Night Journey. Moreover, it briefly presents the story of Adam and Iblis and the honour which God bestowed upon man.

It has to be borne in mind that *Zhilal* may be seen as having one general theme, an overriding monolithic message, which runs counter to the

³⁸The style and content of Quthb's *Zhilal* may be likened to those of al-Maraghi's and Mahmud Shaltut's *tafsirs*, in which each author delivers a sermon-like exegesis. It has furthermore been argued that the *Zhilal* is "an enormous collection of sermons." See, J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 79.

³⁹See Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, *inter alia*, vol. 1, 457-467; vol. 2, 831-2, 985-8; vol. 3, 1429-1431.

⁴⁰Al-'Azham, *Ra'id*, 269.

classical and medieval *tafsir* genres where the messages of the Qur'an were usually taken to be more indirect. Thus, following his introduction, Quthb groups together verses in logical unities which are then analyzed in several pages of commentary. The verses are repeated throughout the commentary of the passage under consideration, which is frequently interrupted by long digressions on various social and religious problems. Quthb also subjects the verses to grammatical analysis to some extent, but it is clear from the text that he is not much interested in this aspect of exegesis, and therefore has little to offer that is new.

With regards to the expansion of the text, Quthb followed closely the writings of the *salaf*, since they sometimes offer new shades of meaning to our understanding of the Qur'an, thus helping define the orientation of the proper Islamic life. Despite their merits, however, Quthb was wary of these reports, since they were not of divine origin, and hence should not be regarded as conclusive. Indeed, he believed that recourse to these reports should be complementary to the exercise of reason, and that *ijtihad* should not obstruct them in any way. Thus, Quthb advocates a re-evaluation of those reports in order to distinguish between the sound and forged elements to be found in them. He also maintains that the statements of the *salaf* concerning the abrogation of verses by others should be considered as mere hypotheses.⁴¹

⁴¹See Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, for example, vol. 1, 457, 467, 242-5; vol. 3, 1431-43.

Sayyid Quthb further maintained that it was of the utmost importance to a *mufassir* to free himself from his own opinion, and to hold the Qur'an and *hadits* as the sole defining factors in the interpretation of the Qur'an. He states: "It [the interpretation of the Qur'an] is too grave for one to interpret it according to one's opinion. It weighs so much in God's scales that a Muslim cannot resort to his own opinion in it. It is the word of God (the Most graceful) and that of his Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) that he must take into consideration in this matter, and that he must refer to, just as true believers always resort to God and the Prophet in their disputes."⁴²

In another place he also says: "I never found myself, not even once, in need of anything outside of this Qur'an, except for the words of the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) which are considered part of the *atsar* of this Qur'an. Indeed, anything else besides them appears weak to the researcher, even if it is correct."⁴³ Thus, it is clear that Quthb was meticulously careful, to the point of dismissal, of the supplementary material often used by other exegetes. And even though he still described this material as 'authentic,' he still felt that it might reflect adversely on the Prophet's character or practice.

At this juncture, it appears that there is a certain affinity between his opinion and that of Muhammad 'Abduh, who demanded of the experts on *tafsir* only that they contemplate the Holy Book and

⁴²Sayyid Quthb, *Ma'alim fi al-Thariq*, 131-2.

⁴³Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, vol. 3, 1423.

extract from it its meaning. It was his belief that "on the last Day, God will not question us on the opinion of the commentators and on how they understood the Koran, but He will question us on his Book which he sent down to guide and instruct us."⁴⁴

However, this stand was in direct opposition to that of 'Abduh and Ridha who favoured the use of reason in the interpretation of the Qur'an. They did so because they wanted to engage the Muslim masses in thinking about and contemplating the Qur'an, thus taking the interpretation of the Holy Book out of the purview of a select scholarly circle and offering it to a wider audience. Nevertheless, some argued that such an approach would subject the Qur'an to changeable human whims, thus detracting from its value and belittling it. One such critic was Quthb himself, who said, "There is no brain that does not suffer from weakness, bias, whim or ignorance. Therefore, if we subject the Qur'an to it... we will end up with chaos."⁴⁵

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One of the distinguishing features of *Zhilal* is that it is not confined to any sectarian interpretation. The author also avoids the grammatical, dialectical and legal discourse which characterizes traditional commentaries and which, he says, "conceals the Qur'an from my soul

and my soul from the Qur'an."⁴⁶ In his eyes, God's Shari'a is the best way (*manhaj*) and is a pure model that can never be corrupted. This is evident from the fact that, according to Quthb, there is no need to delve into the complexities of *fiqh* so long as the Islamic state has not been founded. It will only be when Islam is effectively instituted that we can delve into *fiqh* questions in order to find solutions for the needs of the emerging Muslim community, he declares. As such, the *Zhilal* was fashioned as a work of *tafsir* that could be adopted by the Muslim community in years to come. He hoped that it would become a guide in demolishing the zealous polarization of Muslims so that Islam would be devoted to God and His messenger.⁴⁷


Much as Quthb disapproved of the employment of philosophical concepts in Qur'an exegesis, he was similarly wary of the use of scientific reasoning in uncovering the message of the Qur'an, as some *mufasssirs* have in fact done. The primary justification for their stand lay in Q. 6: 38 "We have neglected nothing in the Book," which they interpreted to the effect that the Qur'an contains all knowledge and philosophy. Accordingly, as a result of this interference by the intellect in Qur'anic exegesis, strange inter-pretations and presuppositions without any affinity to the Qur'an were deduced and imposed on the Qur'an.

⁴⁶Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, vol. 1, 2nd edition, Cairo, 1953, 5.

⁴⁷Sayyid Quthb, *Zhilal*, Dar al-Syuruq edition, among others, vol 1, 168-9, 206, 211-6, 229, 240, 418, 589, 596; vol. 2, 623, 668-9, vol. 4, 1948, 2005; See also Olivier Carré, *Mystique et Politique*, 191-219.

⁴⁴Muhammad 'Abduh, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Hakim*, vol. 1, 25-26; as quoted in Jansen, *The Interpretation*, 19.

⁴⁵Sayyid Quthb, *Khasha'is*, 22.

Quthb, on the other hand, maintained a more balanced position between the use of reasoning and the understanding of the Qur'anic message. He is quick to point out in his *Zhilal* that scientific reasoning is variable and evolves in time, and that the human intellect is limited and different from one individual to another. In addition, the object of the Qur'an is 'aqida not knowledge, and its main subject was man. Thus, because scientific argumentation is unnecessary in contemplating God's Book, the Qur'an must be the parameter for everything and not vice versa. 

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