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## Research Article

# The Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: A Comparative Study of Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

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**Abstract.** This study examines the hermeneutical approaches of Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd in interpreting the Qur'an, highlighting their methodological innovations and epistemological divergences. Fazlur Rahman's "Double Movement" theory seeks to bridge historical and contemporary contexts by extracting universal moral principles from Qur'anic injunctions, maintaining the text's divine authority while advocating for contextual application. In contrast, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd employs a linguistic-historical hermeneutic, treating the Qur'an as a "cultural product" shaped by socio-historical dynamics, thereby emphasizing its textuality over traditional theological frameworks. While Rahman's approach aligns with Islamic moral-theological continuity, Abu Zayd's secular-linguistic methodology, influenced by Western hermeneutics and post-structuralism, challenges

classical exegetical norms, raising concerns about the Qur'an's sacredness and normative authority. The study critically evaluates both models, revealing tensions between modernization and Islamic epistemological foundations, and underscores the necessity of grounding hermeneutical innovations within a *tawḥīd*-centric framework to preserve the Qur'an's integrity as divine guidance.

**Keywords:** Qur'anic Hermenetics, Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Double Movement Theory, Textual Interpretation.

## INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics—a philosophical theory of textual interpretation—is no longer a term imposed solely by external (*outsider*) researchers. It has now been adopted by Muslim scholars (*insiders*) themselves, with significant implications for methodological frameworks.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics emphasizes the *triadic structure* of author, text, and reader, in contrast to classical approaches that focused almost exclusively on the divine Author (Allah as *Qaṣḍ al-Shāri'*). The latter presupposed a linear epistemology: interpreters must discern God's intent (*murād*) through the Prophet Muhammad, the Companions (*Ṣaḥāba*), their successors (*Tābi'ūn*), and subsequent generations, relying on transmission (*riwāya*) and adherence (*taqlīd, ittibā'*).<sup>2</sup>

Recent Muslim intellectuals have shifted this paradigm by centering either the *text* as the locus of meaning (e.g., Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd) or the *reader* (e.g., Fazlur Rahman, Hassan Hanafi, and Amina Wadud). This reader-oriented hermeneutics is often constructed for specific emancipatory aims: liberating oppressed communities, fostering interreligious harmony, or deconstructing gendered injustices. Here, the reader's lived experience and socio-historical context necessitate a renegotiation of religious texts.<sup>3</sup>

Fazlur Rahman stands as a pioneering Muslim scholar who introduced hermeneutics as a methodological framework for contextual Qur'anic interpretation.<sup>4</sup> His approach, particularly applied to legal injunctions in the Qur'an, seeks to address contemporary challenges through what he termed the "Double Movement"

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<sup>1</sup> Nur Zaini, *Hermeneutika Khaled Abou el-Fadl*, di dalam buku *Studi Islam Perspektif Insider/ Outsider*, (Jogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2013), p. 172; Wely Dozan & Muhammad Tumudzi, "The Concept of Hermeneutics as a Methodology of Interpretation of the Qur'an Text." Dec. 2021, *Jurnal Hunafa: Studia Islamika*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 241-261. DOI:[10.24239/jsi.v18i2.554.241-261](https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v18i2.554.241-261); Mohammad Ahyar Yusuf Sya'bani, "Interpretation of Hermeneutics and Religious Normativity: Hermeneutic Approach in Scientific Studies in the Islamic World." *IJISH: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Apr. 2019, pp. 11-21.

<sup>2</sup> Sanusi Lafiagi Haruna, "Contemporary Approaches to Qur'anic Hermeneutics." *Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengembangan Sains dan Humaniora*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2024, pp. 314-318. Open Access: <https://doi.org/10.23887/jppsh.v8i2.83869>

<sup>3</sup> Moch. Nur Ichwan, *Meretus Kesarjanaan al Qur'an: Teori Hermeneutika Aby Zayd* (Jakarta: Teraju, 2003), p. 4; Kurnia Alifani, Rusli Malli, Sumiati, Muhammad Ilham Agus Salim, "Educational Philosophy of Islamic Hermeneutics and Its Implementation in Curriculum Studies." *ICAIS: International Conference on Actual Islamic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Sep. 2023, pp. 415-535.

<sup>4</sup> Abd. Rozaq, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics and its Applications by Fazlur Rahman." *International Journal of Islamicate Social Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Nov. 2023, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62039/ijiss.v1i2.27>

theory. This hermeneutical process begins with the interpreter's modern context, moves backward to the Qur'an's revelatory milieu in 7th-century Arabia, and then returns to the present – aiming to extract universal moral ideals that remain relevant to modern societies.<sup>5</sup>

Central to Rahman's methodology is the concept of *Risalah Qur'aniyyah* (the Qur'anic message), which serves as the nexus between God's eternal Word and its temporal manifestation through Prophet Muhammad's historical mission. He argues that Qur'anic exegesis must transcend literal linguistic analysis to incorporate the socio-historical circumstances of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*). This positions the Qur'an simultaneously as a divine text and a historically embedded document.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd reconceptualizes Qur'anic studies through the dialectic of text (*nass*) and interpretation (*ta'wil*). He critiques traditional approaches that treat interpretation as taboo, arguing this ideological closure has frozen textual meaning.<sup>7</sup> By asserting the Qur'an's textuality, Abu Zayd advocates applying modern literary criticism tools while maintaining its sacred character. His historical-textual approach posits that acknowledging the Qur'an's historicity actually facilitates deeper understanding, whereas rigid literalism renders the text vulnerable to ideological manipulation.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, by emphasizing the textuality of the Qur'an, Abu Zayd seeks to reframe Qur'anic studies within the context of critical literary theory. In his view, like any other text, the Qur'an can be approached using various tools of modern textual analysis. His positioning of the Qur'an as a historical text does not, in his opinion, diminish its divine origin. Rather, it is the historicity of the text that enables it to be a legitimate subject of interpretation (*ta'wil*) and understanding. When the meaning of the Qur'an is frozen, it becomes susceptible to ideological manipulation by its readers.<sup>9</sup>

However, significant critiques emerge regarding these hermeneutical models. As methodologies originally developed for Biblical studies, their application to the Qur'an raises epistemological concerns. Traditional Islamic scholarship has

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Yusuf, Nahdhiya, & Anwar Sadat, "Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement and Its Contribution to the Development of Religious Moderation." *IJISH: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 51-71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26555/ijish.v4i1.2667>; Zaprul Khan, *Teori Hermeneutika Fazlur Rahman*, Noura, Vol. 1, Juni 2017. p 23.

<sup>6</sup> Sa'dullah Assa'idi, *Pemahaman Tematik Al-Qur'an Menurut Fazlur Rahman*, (Yogyakarta: PUSTAKAPELAJAR, 2013), p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> Metsra Wirman 2023. Abu Zayd's Hermeneutics Approach to The Qur'an: A Refutation. *Al-Fanar : Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir*. 6, 2 (Aug. 2023), 1-10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33511/alfanar.v6n2>, pp. 1-10; Mufid, A., Massoweang, A.K., Mujizatullah, M., Muslim, A. & Yani, Z., 2023, 'Rereading Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's method of interpreting religious texts', *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a8102. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8102>

<sup>8</sup> Abu Zayd, *Maqhum al-Nas: Dirasah fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, (Beirut: Markaz al-Tsaqafi al-'Arabi), pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad Sulaiman, "From Textuality to Discursivity; The Hermeneutics of Quran Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd." *Sophist*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Jul.-Dec. 2023, pp. 304-327; Moch. Nur Ichwan, *Meretas Kesarjanaan Kritis Al-Qur'an: Teori Hermeneutika Abu Zayd*, (Jakarta: Teraju, Cetakan Pertama, 2003), p. 42; Alfitri, "Studi Qur'an Kontemporer: Tellah atas Hermeneutik Qur'an Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd." *Millah*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Aug. 2002, pp. 50-66.

developed sophisticated exegetical systems (*tafsir*) over centuries, and the uncritical adoption of Western hermeneutics has sometimes led to deconstruction of established (*qat'i*) Islamic legal principles.<sup>10</sup>

This study examines two principal hermeneutical frameworks advanced by Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. First, it investigates Rahman's Qur'anic hermeneutics through three analytical dimensions: (1) the developmental trajectory of his theoretical approach, (2) its methodological application in contemporary exegesis, and (3) critical evaluations from traditional and modern scholarly perspectives. Second, the paper analyzes Abu Zayd's linguistic hermeneutics, with particular focus on his textual theory's epistemological assumptions and its practical implications for Qur'anic interpretation.

## Fazlur Rahman's Qur'anic Hermeneutics: A Conceptual Framework

### a. Fazlur Rahman's Thematic Understanding of the Qur'an

The Qur'an, as divine "guidance for humankind" (*hudan li al-nās*), is traditionally regarded not merely as a source of teachings but as *the ultimate reality*—a metaphysical-transcendental manifestation of God's will.<sup>11</sup> However, Rahman reinterprets this proposition by shifting its epistemological status from a static theological axiom to a dynamic, experiential framework, as systematically demonstrated in his seminal work *Major Themes of the Qur'an*.<sup>12</sup>

Rahman elucidates the Qur'an's function for humanity by establishing a coherent relationship between the revelatory teachings of the Qur'an and their practical implementation in concrete reality. The essential element of his approach is positioning the Qur'an as an active Subject that discloses its own meaning.<sup>13</sup> As Subject, the Qur'an operates within multiple conceptual spheres: as a source of understanding, an agent of action, a fountain of values, and a guide for practical application in factual reality.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously, Rahman treats the Qur'an as an Object of study and analysis. In this context, the Object is not merely a passive or positive element, but rather is examined in relation to how people enact the Qur'an's message. Beyond

<sup>10</sup> Andri Nirwana AN, Fahmi Arfan, Fahmi Dolles Marshal, Candra Maulana, & Nazar Fadli, "Metodologi Tafsir Al-Qur'an: Methods of Qur'an Research and Qur'an Tafseer Research its implications for Contemporary Islamic Thought." *Bulletin of Islamic Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2024, pp. 33-42. DOI: 10.69526/bir.v2i1.34; Çoruh, H. (2019). Introduction. In: *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*. Palgrave Series in Islamic Theology, Law, and History. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15349-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15349-6_1); Mamat Salamet Burhanuddin & Noer Diana Khalida, "Ali Jum'ah Approach on Qur'anic Maqasidi Exegesis; A Study of *Al-Nibras fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*." *Mushaff: Jurnal Tafsir Berwawasan Keindonesiaan*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Jun. 2021, pp. 1-21.

<sup>11</sup> Rouzati, Nasrin, *Notion of Divine Trial in the Qur'an A Critical Analysis and Reappraisal of the Bala Narratives*, Durham Theses, Durham University, pp. 207-243. <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/10541/>

<sup>12</sup> Abdelnour, Mohammed Gamal. 2023. "The Qur'ān and the Future of Islamic Analytic Theology" *Religions* 14, no. 4: 556. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040556>

<sup>13</sup> Rahman said, "...the Qur'an has been allowed to speak for itself, interpretation has been used only as necessary for joining together ideas". Lihat: *Fazlur Rahman, Major Themes of The Qur'an* (Minneapolis – Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), p. x

<sup>14</sup> Sayed Hassan Akhlaq, *Intellectual and Spiritual Debates in Islam: A Comparative Guide to Islamic Discourse's Intellectual Origins*, Presa Universitara Clujeana, 2023, pp. 38-41.

terminological definitions, the Qur'an is thus understood not simply as divine revelation, but as a dynamic force whose practical application across diverse life contexts generates valuable intellectual frameworks.<sup>15</sup>

From a connotative structural perspective, Rahman successfully positions the Qur'anic revelation as an object of study, systematically developed in his seminal work *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. This intellectual project identifies eight foundational themes: (1) God, (2) Human as individual, (3) Human as social being, (4) The cosmos, (5) Prophethood and revelation, (6) Eschatology, (7) Satan and evil, and (8) The Muslim community. Rahman's analytical framework examines the essential nature (ṭabī'a) of these themes, demonstrating what he terms a "hermeneutical consciousness" - evident in his assertion that "the Qur'an presents itself as 'the most comprehensive guidance for humankind'... [with its] revelation unfolding over twenty years alongside Prophet Muhammad's career"<sup>16</sup> This historical duration, Rahman argues, reveals the Qur'an's dual character: possessing both transcendental-metaphysical dimensions and empirical elements grounded in concrete human experience. His hermeneutical approach seeks to transform the Qur'an's ideal and metaphysical truths into lived realities within individual and collective existence. The coherent relationship between Qur'anic teachings and their practical implementation - what might be termed the "parallel historicity" of revelation and prophetic biography - constitutes what Rahman identifies as the essential mission (risāla) of the Qur'an.<sup>17</sup>

In general, through his theory of double movement, Fazlur Rahman offers a method of interpreting the Qur'an that involves two interrelated and dialectical processes: from the present situation to the time of the Qur'an's revelation, and then back to the present.<sup>18</sup> The first movement seeks to trace the entirety of the circumstances surrounding the Divine response—delivered through the mind of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)—to the societal issues of Meccan society at the time. The second movement involves examining the contemporary situation in all its dimensions—social, cultural, economic, normative, political, and institutional.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Dalam konteks wahyu al-Qur'an mengalir meproduktifkan pemikiran, telah Rahman mengatakan, "Sesungguhnya tidak satu orang pun yang membaca al-Qur'an secara cermat, tidak bisa tidak, tentu akan melihat sifat the gradual character of Islamic Reform (sifat bertahap reformasi Islam). Lihat: Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> The career of the Prophet was not only the occasion for the revelation of the Qur'an, but also its most important and authoritative practical interpretation. The Qur'an came down in the course of that career and was inextricably bound up with it. See: Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity – Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago & London Press, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*, Chapt. 11: *Ethico-legal texts a hierarchy of values*, Routledge: USA & Canada, 2006, pp. 24-25.

<sup>18</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*, Chapt. 2: *The Context of the Debate on Interpretation*, Routledge: USA & Canada, 2006, pp. 127-128. See: Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 5, 13-22.

<sup>19</sup> Halim Calis, "The Theoretical Foundations of Contextual Interpretation of the Qur'anic in Islamic Theological Schools and Philosophical Sufism." *Religious*, 2022, 13, 188, p. 16. 188, doi:10.3390/rel13020188; Ahad M. Ahmed, "The Theological Thought of Fazlur Rahman: A Modern Mutakallim." Thesis, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan, pp. 59-60.



Bridging the temporal distance between the transcendental-metaphysical nature of the Qur'anic revelation and the factual-empirical reality of the present can be approached through an existential hermeneutic. As Gadamer asserted, a text must be understood based on its own internal structure.<sup>20</sup> To arrive at a genuinely practical solution to the "distance" between past and present, one must ground the analysis in essential elements common to all relevant factors, including the target audience, the social life forming its contextual background, the natural environment in which life unfolds, and, ultimately, the human being as an agent, along with all dimensions of their existence and consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

Rahman elaborates this dialectic of the double movement through two main steps.<sup>22</sup> First, one must understand the meaning or import of a particular Qur'anic statement by analyzing the historical situation or problem to which the statement served as a response. This necessarily involves a macro-level study of the socio-historical context in Arabia at the time of Islam's emergence—especially around Mecca—without neglecting broader events such as the Persian-Byzantine wars. Before analyzing specific verses in light of their particular contexts, it is essential to first grasp the overall situation in terms of society, religion, customs, institutions, and the general conditions of life.

The second step is to generalize these specific responses and articulate them as statements embodying general moral and social objectives. These aims can be distilled from the specific verses when viewed against their socio-historical backgrounds and the underlying rationale (*ratio legis*) often implied in the text. Indeed, the first step—understanding the meaning of specific verses—already implies and leads to the second. Throughout this process, attention must be given to the overall trajectory of the Qur'an's teachings so that every interpreted meaning, legal prescription, and formulated objective coheres with the others.<sup>23</sup>

The second movement must proceed from these general moral visions toward the formulation and realization of specific perspectives in the present. That is, the general teachings must be *embodied* within the concrete socio-historical context of today.<sup>24</sup> This, once again, requires a careful study of the present condition and a thorough analysis of its various components so that the current reality may be properly assessed and transformed as necessary. It also demands the establishment of new priorities to effectively implement the Qur'anic values in a renewed manner.

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 259.

<sup>21</sup> HG. Gadamer, *Om farstaelsens sirkel*, Tub: Sma Skrifter 4, Variasjoner, 1977; Jonas Debesay, Dagfinn Naden & Ashild Slettebo, "How do we close the hermeneutic circle? A Gadamerian approach to justification in qualitative studies." *Nursing Inquiry*, 2008, 15: pp. 57-66.

<sup>22</sup> Kharis Nugroho, Muhammad Zawil Kiram, & Didik Andriawan, "The Influence of Hermeneutics in Double Movement Theory (Critical Analysis of Fazlur Rahman's Interpretation Methodology)." *Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2023, pp. 275-289. DOI: 10.23917/qist.v2i3.2531

<sup>23</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam dan Modernitas*, terj. Ahsin Mohammad (Bandung: Pustaka, 200), p. 7; Muhammad Yusuf, Nahdhiyah, & Anwar Sadat, "Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement and Its Contribution to the Development of Religious Moderation." *IJISH: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Apr. 2021, pp. 51-71. DOI: [10.26555/ijish.v4i1.2667](https://doi.org/10.26555/ijish.v4i1.2667)

<sup>24</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of The Qur'an*, pp. 18-19.

To the extent that we can successfully carry out both phases of this double movement, the commands of the Qur'an will become once again vibrant and effective in our lives.<sup>25</sup>

To practice this second movement—applying the values derived from the Qur'an to the contemporary world—requires a highly complex analysis. However, Fazlur Rahman does not elaborate in detail how such an analysis, which would ideally integrate both the social and intellectual domains, is to be conducted. What is evident from Rahman's thought, nonetheless, is his affirmation of the usefulness of modern social sciences and contemporary humanities as effective tools in offering a deeper understanding of history.<sup>26</sup>

According to Rahman, the Qur'anic *moral ideal* refers to the fundamental moral objectives advocated by the Qur'an, whereas the *specific legal rulings* refer to its particular legal prescriptions. Rahman maintains that the moral ideals of the Qur'an are more suitable for application than its specific legal rulings, because the former are universal in nature. At this level, the Qur'an is viewed as applicable to every time and place (*ṣāliḥ li-kulli zamān wa makān*). It is seen as both elastic and flexible, while its specific legal rulings are particular and historically contextual. The legal norms, as expressed in the text, were tailored to the conditions of their time and place.<sup>27</sup>

Through his theory of double movement, then, Rahman seeks to understand the reasoning behind the Qur'an's responses and to extract the broader legal or normative principles. In doing so, he emphasizes the importance of interpreting the universal significance of the text over a literal adherence to its historically-bound expressions. Rahman does not restrict himself to the textual formulation alone, but rather to the substantive values embedded within those expressions.<sup>28</sup>

Responding to this methodology, Leonard Binder explains that Rahman's double movement seeks to create an interpretive framework that is integrated and consistent across all parts of the Qur'an. Through this approach, Rahman demonstrates himself to be a true hermeneutist, attempting to understand the Qur'an through a hermeneutical method.<sup>29</sup> In Rahman's view, the historical reality of Qur'anic values could be apprehended through rigorous scholarly investigation; however, the experiential understanding of their ultimate truth was reserved for those

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8; Femy Putri Nursyifa, Hilya Nuri Naqiya, Nur Azizah, Muhammad Rofi Muttaqin, & Puji Purwati, "Criticism of Fazlur Rahman's Al-Qur'an Hermeneutics," *Journal of 'Ulumu al-Qur'an and Tafsir Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2023, pp. 4-10. <https://doi.org/10.54801/juquts.v2i1.170>

<sup>26</sup> Amin Abdullah, dkk, "*Madzhab*" *Jogya* (Yogyakarta: Ar-Ruzz, 2002), p. 123; Muhammad Miftah Irfan & Fatimah Shalehah, "Application of Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement Theory about Milk al Yamin," *At-Tajdid: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pemikiran Islam*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Jun. 2022, pp. 71-84. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24127/att.v6i2ia2366>

<sup>27</sup> Sibawaihi, *Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an*, p. 56-57; Maria Ulfa & Ahmad Hisyam Syamil, "The Concept of Morality According to Fazlur Rahman," *TASFIYAH*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Feb. 2023, pp. 87-110. <https://ejournal.unida.gontor.ac.id/index.php/tasfiah> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24127/att.v6i2ia2366>

<sup>28</sup> Abd Rozaq, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics and its Applications by Fazlur Rahman," *International Journal of Islamic Social Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Nov. 2023, pp. 115-124. DOI: [10.62039/ijiss.v1i2.27](https://doi.org/10.62039/ijiss.v1i2.27)

<sup>29</sup> Abd. A'la, *Dari Neo Modernisme ke Islam Liberal Jejak Fazlur Rahman dalam Wacana Islam di Indonesia*, (Dian Rakyat, Paramadina, 2009) pp. 84-85.

who embraced the Islamic faith. While he acknowledged the possibility that non-Muslim scholars, through deep engagement with the Qur'an's historical and ethical framework, might be inspired to recognize its truth and even arrive at faith, he maintained that genuine belief remained essential. For Rahman, faith was not only a gateway to comprehending the Qur'anic worldview in its entirety but also a necessary condition for meaningful involvement in Islamic reform and for the full realization of his vision of fusion between tradition and modernity.<sup>30</sup>

## The Al-Qur'an from the Perspective of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

### a. Understanding Al-Qur'an as a Text

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd does not explicitly define what he means by *text* (*naṣṣ*) in his book *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ (The Concept of Text)*.<sup>31</sup> However, he does distinguish between *naṣṣ* (text) and *muṣḥaf* (the physical codex). According to Abu Zayd, *naṣṣ* refers to meaning (*dalālah*) and thus requires understanding, explanation, and interpretation. In contrast, *muṣḥaf* has been transformed into a "thing" (*shay'*)—either as an aesthetic object (*tustakhdamu li al-zīnah*) or as an item used to attain divine blessing (*barakah*).<sup>32</sup>

Abu Zayd argues that the Qur'an portrays itself as a *risālah* (message), and a *risālah* implies a communicative relationship between a sender and a receiver through a system of codes or language.<sup>33</sup> However, given that the sender—in the case of the Qur'an—is divine and thus inaccessible to scientific inquiry, Abu Zayd maintains that the most appropriate entry point for scholarly study of the Qur'anic text must be through human reality and culture: the social reality that governs human activity as the addressee of the text, and the cultural context, embodied in language, that shaped the first recipient of the text, namely the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).<sup>34</sup>

Abu Zayd's development of a theory of text is linked to language and culture, effectively removing the divine dimension of the text from scholarly investigation. Consequently, like any other human text, the Qur'an—once it has become a text—must be analyzed using discourse analysis and semiotics. In discourse analysis, a text is defined as a linguistic sign system that produces meaning, whereas in semiotics, a text encompasses all systems of signs that produce meaning, including symbols,

<sup>30</sup> Megan Brankely Abbas, "Between Western Academia and Pakista: Fazlur Rahman and the fight for fusionism." *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2017), Cambridge University Press, pp. 760-768. [doi:10.1017/S0026749X15000517](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X15000517)

<sup>31</sup> Michal Moch, "Critique of Nash in Contemporary Qur'anic Hermeneutics Using the Example of nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Works." *Religious*, (2022), 13, 982, pp. 95-104. [doi:10.3390/rel13100982](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100982); Moch. Nur Ichwan, *Meretas Kesarjanaan Kritis Al-Qur'an*, p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nas Dirasah fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, (Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi; Banten) p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhum an-nass. Dirasa fi 'ulum al-Qur'an (The Concept of the Text: A Study of the Sciences of the Qur'an)*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Al-Qahira: Al-Mu'assasa al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-l-Kitab, 1990 p. 27; Michal Moch, *Nasr Abu Zayd: A Critical Rereading of Islamic Thought*, Bydgoszcz: Kazimierz Wielki University Publishing Office, 2017, pp. 65-66.

<sup>34</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nas Dirasah fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, (Yogyakarta; LkiS, 2002) p. 19-20.



statues, advertisements, caricatures, and films. Thus, discourse analysis becomes a subset of semiotics concerned with linguistic signs.<sup>35</sup> In his discourse analysis, Abu Zayd categorizes texts into two types: *primary* and *secondary* texts. The *primary text* refers to the Qur'an itself, while *secondary texts* include the Sunnah and the opinions of the Companions and later Muslim scholars.<sup>36</sup>

Abu Zayd further develops his hermeneutical project by fundamentally removing the divine dimension from the study of the Qur'an. In his view, linguistic analysis is the most appropriate and effective method for engaging with the Qur'anic text. This position, however, effectively leads to a secular approach to Qur'anic studies. It appears paradoxical to study a religious text while discarding its divine aspect.<sup>37</sup> In fact, a similar approach in biblical studies has, in some cases, resulted in reducing Christian doctrines to mere literary content within the Bible, devoid of legally binding commandments (*sharī'ah*) practiced by its adherents. There is concern that the same fate could befall Islamic understanding if this secular-linguistic methodology is fully applied to the Qur'an.

According to Abu Zayd, excessive emphasis on the divine dimension (*al-ba'd al-ilāhī*) has caused stagnation in Islamic thought.<sup>38</sup> He argues that the Qur'an is "the word of Muhammad reporting what he asserts is the Word of God." That is, the Qur'an is a divine message mediated and expressed through the person of Muhammad.<sup>39</sup> Abu Zayd writes: "*The Word of God needed to adapt itself to human form because God wished to communicate with human beings. If God spoke in the language of God, humans would understand nothing.*"<sup>40</sup>

This implies that revelation, in Abu Zayd's theory, when delivered to the Prophet Muhammad, consisted only of meaning—due to the inherent limitations of language. He writes that revelation is a form of communication between God and human beings. However, this communication is asymmetrical: God belongs to one existential category, while humans belong to another. Consequently, in Abu Zayd's view, the Prophet's interpretation of the divine message into human language was inevitably influenced by his own psychological, social, and cultural conditions. The Prophet, being a product of his environment, expressed the divine message within the linguistic and cultural constraints of his time.<sup>41</sup>

Here, it becomes clear that in proposing his hermeneutic, Abu Zayd adopts the foundational assumptions of Western hermeneutics. The term *hermeneutics* itself originates from Greek mythology, where Hermes—the son of Zeus and Maia—was believed to be the divine messenger responsible for interpreting and conveying the

<sup>35</sup> Moch. Nur Ichman, *Meretas Kesarjanaan kritis Al-Qur'an*, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Abu Zayd, 2004, pp. 25-27.

<sup>38</sup> Abu Zayd dan Esther R. Nelson, *Voice of an Exile: Reflection on Islam*, London: Westport, Connecticut, 2004, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> Michal Moch, "Critique of Nash in Contemporary Qur'anic Hermeneutics Using the Example of nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Works." *Religious*, (2022), 13, 982, pp. 95-104. [doi:10.3390/rel13100982](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100982)

gods' messages to humans. This myth underscores the idea that divine language is unintelligible to humans unless mediated.

Abu Zayd's approach to the Qur'an draws heavily from literary criticism and Western theories of interpretation, which he encountered during his academic experience at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.<sup>42</sup> He acknowledges this influence, stating "*I did a lot of reading on my own, especially in the fields of philosophy and hermeneutics. Hermeneutics—the science of interpreting texts—opened up a brand-new world for me.*" Having immersed himself in Western hermeneutical literature, Abu Zayd then explored the nature of the *text*—a foundational concern in hermeneutics.<sup>43</sup>

It is from this point that he launches his Qur'anic textual study, positioning the Qur'an as both a *product of culture* (*muntaj al-thaqāfah*) and simultaneously a *producer of culture* (*muntij li al-thaqāfah*). According to him, this cultural dynamic operates through two phases. The first is the *formative phase* (*marḥalat al-tashakkul*), which occurred over a period of more than twenty years, during which the Qur'anic text was structurally shaped within the cultural context in which it was revealed. The second is the *cultural production phase* (*marḥalat al-tashkīl*), wherein the Qur'an, once revealed, begins to reconstruct and shape a new cultural system.<sup>44</sup>

## b. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an

To address the interpretive challenges of the Qur'an, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd proposes the use of hermeneutics as a new conceptual framework for Qur'anic interpretation in contemporary Islamic thought.<sup>45</sup> According to Abu Zayd, the most appropriate analytical method for understanding the Qur'an—as a text that is inseparable from a linguistic system functioning both informatively and communicatively—is linguistic analysis (*minḥāj al-taḥlīl al-lughawī*). This method, he argues, is the only viable one because it aligns directly with the object and subject matter of Qur'anic study. The formal object of Islamic studies is "Islam" itself, which, by the consensus of scholars across sectarian lines, is based fundamentally on the Qur'an and Hadith.<sup>46</sup>

Abu Zayd emphasizes that these foundational texts were not revealed all at once in a final and perfect form, but rather "came into being" (*tashakkala*) over a

<sup>42</sup> Adnin Armas, *Metode Bible dalam Studi Al-Qur'an Kajian Kritis*, (Jakarta: Gema Insani, Cetakan, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2007), p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>44</sup> M. Shohibuddin, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd tentang Semiotika Al-Qur'an dalam Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an*, mazhab Yogya, (Yogyakarta: Islamika, 2003). p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Nasr Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*, Amsterdam and Utrecht: SWP with University for Humanistics, 2004, pp. 25-27; Yusuf Rahman, "The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur'an." Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada, 2001, p. 142.

<sup>46</sup> Nasr Abu Zaid, *Mafhum an-nass. Dirasa fi 'ulum al-Qur'an* [The Concept of the Text: A Study of the Sciences of the Qur'an], 1st ed. Al-Qahira: Al-Mu'assasa al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-l-Kitab, 1990, pp. 131-137; Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nash*, terj. Khoiron nahdliyin..., p. 21. Najjar, Fauzi M. "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Nasr Ḥamid Abū Zayd." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 2 (2000): 177-200. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/826091>.

period of more than twenty years. By “came into being,” he refers to their historical and cultural formation without reference to any pre-existing eternal form in God’s knowledge (*‘ilm Allāh*) or the *Lauh al-Mahfūz*.<sup>47</sup> He criticizes the traditional Sunni view of the Qur’an’s pre-existence in the *Lauh al-Mahfūz*, arguing that it reflects a mythological—even quasi-pagan—element that contradicts the essence of Islamic monotheism. In line with Mu’tazilite theology, he maintains that the *Lauh al-Mahfūz* is not eternal (*qadīm*), but created (*ḥādith*), and therefore, the Qur’an written within it cannot be eternal either. Otherwise, it would imply the existence of multiple eternal entities besides God, which is theologically untenable.<sup>48</sup>

In elaborating his theory of the Qur’an as a cultural product (*muntaj al-thaqāfah*), Abu Zayd argues that the true nature of the Qur’anic text lies in its ability to liberate itself from its original historical context and generate independent vitality.<sup>49</sup> The Qur’an, as a text, is simultaneously an object and a product of the socio-cultural system within which it emerged, and at the same time, it acts as a subject that transforms that very socio-cultural system. For Abu Zayd, the miraculous nature of the Qur’an (*i’jāz al-Qur’ān*) does not need to be traced back to its divine origin, but rather lies in its unique literary excellence, which surpasses all other texts and profoundly influenced its cultural environment.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, Abu Zayd argues that interpretation should go beyond uncovering the meaning of a text; it must also generate **new significance** by recontextualizing the historical meaning of the text within the socio-cultural realities of the contemporary reader. This requires taking into account both the historical context of the text and the ideological and cultural context of the reader. Interpretation, in this sense, is **dialectical**—it does not occur instantly but unfolds through a process. It begins with a naïve understanding, moves toward an objective explanation, and ultimately returns to a more refined and sophisticated understanding. This final understanding then becomes the foundation for subsequent readings.<sup>51</sup>

Abu Zayd seeks to demonstrate that the Qur’an is a historicized text, a claim he supports by highlighting the characteristics of its revelation. First, the Qur’an contains divine messages to humankind, revealed in the Arabic language to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) over time—either through direct inspiration, from

<sup>47</sup> Ahmad Sulaiman, “From Textuality to Discursivity; The Hermeneutics of Qur’an Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.” *Sophist: Jurnal Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Jul.-Dec. 2023, pp. 304-427. DOI: [10.20414/sophist.v5i2.96](https://doi.org/10.20414/sophist.v5i2.96)

<sup>48</sup> Nashr Hamid Abu Zayd, *al-Nash wa al-Sulthah wa al-Haqiqah*, terj. Sunarwoto Dema, (Yogyakarta: LkiS, 2003), p. 92; Muhammad Yusuf Kasim & Hasyim Haddade, “Understanding Text and Context for Productive Reading: an Analysis of Abu Zaid’s Hermeneutics of the Qur’an.” *Addin*, 15(2): 153-196, Oct. 2022, DOI: [10.21043/addin.v15i2.10765](https://doi.org/10.21043/addin.v15i2.10765)

<sup>49</sup> Michal Moch, *Nasr Abu Zayd: A Critical Rereading of Islamic Thought*, Bydgoszcz, 2017, pp. 66-69; Muhammad Youfi Nur Mutiullah, “Seeing Islam as a Social Fact: Hermeneutic Approach to the Qur’an in Abu Zayd’s Thought.” *Journal of Qur’an and Hadith Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Jan.-Jun. 2023, pp. 41-56. Doi: [10.15408/quhas.v12i1.31372](https://doi.org/10.15408/quhas.v12i1.31372)

<sup>50</sup> M. Shohibuddin, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd tentang Semiotika Al-Qur’an*, Dalam *Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an Mazhab Yogya*”,.,, p. 113-114.

<sup>51</sup> M. Shohibuddin, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd tentang Semiotika Al-Qur’an...*, hlm. 117-118.

behind a veil, or via an intermediary (i.e., the angel Gabriel). Abu Zayd constructs a conceptual framework for the process of revelation, from God to the angel, and then to the Prophet through face-to-face communication using Arabic as a medium. Since revelation (*wahy*) is semantically equivalent to divine speech (*kalām Allāh*) in the Qur'an, and the Qur'an itself is a message, it is reasonable, he argues, to regard the Qur'an as a text.<sup>52</sup>

Abu Zayd's view of the Qur'an as a historicized text is heavily influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey, who argued that the author does not have ultimate authority over the meaning of a text; rather, history determines that meaning.<sup>53</sup> However, this approach is problematic in the context of the Qur'an. For Muslim exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*), it is God—the Author—who transforms history. The Qur'an is not merely a product of history; it reconfigures conceptual structures, semantic fields, and key terminologies to project an Islamic worldview.<sup>54</sup>

According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the fundamental principle of Qur'anic interpretation is that "the Qur'an is not intended to provide answers to all human problems."<sup>55</sup> The Qur'an does not contain everything; many aspects of human life must be sought from sources outside the Qur'an. In his view, if Qur'anic interpretation is always directed toward actualizing all kinds of human needs and fulfilling every demand, then interpretation becomes easily subject to manipulation. Consequently, interpretation risks becoming a tool for justifying particular opinions or predetermined positions.<sup>56</sup>

Abu Zayd attempts to introduce secularism into Islamic discourse, implying that secularism is inherent within the Qur'anic message—suggesting that Islam is solely a religion concerned with theological matters, while worldly affairs are disconnected from the Qur'an.<sup>57</sup> However, numerous scholars and philosophers have demonstrated that the Qur'an contains a significant number of verses that relate to various fields of knowledge, including philosophy, science, economics, and others. Shaykh Mahmoud Shaltut affirms that one of the defining characteristics of the Qur'an is its comprehensiveness, encompassing the knowledge found in previous scriptures as well as broader fields of human knowledge.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Abu Zayd, *Al-Qur'an Hermenitika dan Kekuasaan*, Bandung: RQis, Cetakan 1, 2003, hlm. 91.

<sup>53</sup> Ilham B. Saenong, *Hermeneutika Pembahasan: Metodologi Tafsir Al-Qur'an Menurut Hasan Hanafi*, Jakarta: Teraju, 2002, hlm. 36.

<sup>54</sup> Adnin Armas, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an atau Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an*, *Majalah Islamia*, Thn 1 No. 1/ Muharram 1425, hlm. 39.

<sup>55</sup> Sam'ani. (2022). Maghza Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Interpretation Concept As a Counter of Polygamy Pragmatism. *Religia*, 25(2), 135–148. <https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v25i2.817>

<sup>56</sup> Mufid, A., Massoweang, A.K., Mujizatullah, M., Muslim, A. & Yani, Z., 2023, 'Rereading Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's method of interpreting religious texts', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a8102. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8102>

<sup>57</sup> Tayob, Abdulkader. "Decolonizing the Study of Religions: Muslim Intellectuals and the Enlightenment Project of Religious Studies." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 31, no. 2 (2018): 7–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26778573>.

<sup>58</sup> Imam Mahmoud Muhammad Shaltut, *The Qur'an and Combat*, The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought: Jordan, (2012), pp. 12–13.

From the perspective of the Islamic worldview, the author concludes that the claim that secularism is inherent within the Qur'anic message, as suggested by Abu Zayd, reflects a reductionist approach that conflicts with the holistic and integrative nature of Islam. Islam does not divide between the sacred and the secular; rather, it presents a unified vision of life in which divine guidance permeates all aspects of human existence—spiritual, moral, social, economic, and political. The Qur'an repeatedly addresses matters beyond pure theology, offering principles and guidance related to governance, justice, knowledge, and human development. Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut's assertion of the Qur'an's comprehensiveness affirms this integrative outlook, indicating that Islam is not confined to ritual or doctrinal concerns but engages with the totality of human experience. Thus, attempts to isolate Islam to a private theological sphere misrepresent its foundational ethos and disregard its function as a comprehensive way of life rooted in *tawhīd* (the Oneness of God), where all domains of life are interconnected under divine guidance.

## CONCLUSION

In comparing the hermeneutical methodologies of Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, it is evident that both scholars sought to revitalize Qur'anic interpretation in light of contemporary social realities. Fazlur Rahman's *Double Movement* theory offers a two-step hermeneutical process: first extracting moral-ethical principles from specific legal rulings contextualized within the Qur'an's historical setting, and then reapplying those principles to the modern socio-historical context. This method emphasizes coherence, moral purpose, and the integrative structure of the Qur'an, aiming to prevent atomistic or selective readings. In contrast, Abu Zayd, while sharing a critical stance toward traditional exegesis, posits a more radical view—seeing the Qur'an as a “cultural product” embedded in human linguistic constraints, and arguing that its interpretation must account for the evolving dynamics of discourse and power.

However, significant divergences emerge. Rahman attempts to preserve the divine authority of the Qur'an while emphasizing its ethical universality, whereas Abu Zayd's hermeneutic leans more toward secular-linguistic and post-structuralist frameworks influenced by Western thinkers such as Dilthey, Gadamer, and Habermas. Critics argue that Abu Zayd's approach diminishes the Qur'an's revelatory and normative character, aligning it instead with human historical constructs. Moreover, while Rahman still operates within a framework that upholds the binding authority of Shari'ah (despite efforts to modernize its application), Abu Zayd is accused of reducing Islam to a purely theological and non-political domain, thus undermining its socio-legal dimensions. These tensions have led to criticisms of inconsistency, particularly regarding Abu Zayd's alleged secularist leanings and controversial interpretations on issues such as *riba* and polygamy.

Ultimately, while both Rahman and Abu Zayd strive for a contextualized understanding of the Qur'an, their epistemological commitments diverge. Rahman remains rooted in a moral-theological framework that seeks coherence with traditional Islamic principles, whereas Abu Zayd departs significantly by foregrounding discourse theory and modern secular epistemologies. This



comparative analysis highlights that the hermeneutics of the Qur'an is not a neutral field but is deeply intertwined with broader philosophical, theological, and ideological assumptions. As such, any methodological innovation in Qur'anic interpretation must be critically evaluated not only for its internal consistency but also for its fidelity to the holistic message and divine authority of the Qur'anic revelation.

From the standpoint of the Islamic worldview, the author confirms that, the comparative analysis above requires a more critical assessment of the epistemological foundations, especially in Abu Zayd's approach. While Fazlur Rahman's method, though modernist, maintains the Qur'an's divine authority within a moral-theological framework, Abu Zayd's reliance on secular-linguistic and post-structuralist theories risks undermining the *taqdis* (sacredness) of revelation. In Islamic epistemology, knowledge is grounded in *tawhīd* and *wahy*, and cannot be fully subjected to historicist or ideological critique without compromising its metaphysical and normative core. The author emphasizes that, modern methods must be reoriented within an Islamic metaphysical framework. Abu Zayd's hermeneutics, therefore, reflect a deeper rupture with the Islamic worldview and raise concerns about their alignment with *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and the Qur'an's role as divine guidance.

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