Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's Use of Classical Theological and Philosophical Islamic Sources in His Qurʾānic Hermeneutics

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Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943 – 2010) is one of the most controversial contemporary Egyptian scholars in the Islamic intellectual context. One of his main concerns was to apply textual criticism to the interpretations of the Qurʾān. This is not an easy task considering the divine status of the prophetic message. Abū Zayd's approach to the Arabic notion of interpretation (taʾwil) leads to an innovative and polemical approach to the Islamic prophetic message. Although Abū Zayd resorts to contemporary hermeneutics, I argue that he draws on three intellectual branches of classical Islam in which textual criticism was already being applied and, thus, made the bridge to hermeneutics and contemporary semiotic and semantic theories easier. These three branches are firstly, the Muʿtazila, a rationalist theological school; secondly, the philosophical Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī; and, finally, Shiite Qurʾānic exegesis.

Introduction
Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943 – 2010) is one of the most controversial contemporary Egyptian scholars in the Islamic intellectual context. He taught Arabic and Islamic studies at the Department of Arabic Language and Literature of the University of Cairo. In 1995 he went into exile in the Netherlands due to threats from extremist Islamic groups who considered his writings to be apostate (Abū Zayd 2008; 2011; Tamer 2011). One of his main concerns was to apply textual criticism to the interpretations of the Qurʾān.

This is not an easy task considering the divine status of the prophetic message. Abū Zayd's works are focused precisely on the search for a method of Qurʾānic interpretation contending with what he considered tendentious and ideological readings of the Sacred Book. He incorporated modern and contemporary hermeneutics, semiotics, semantics, and linguistic theories, of thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Roman Jakobson, Ferdinand de Saussure, the Russian-Estonian semiotician Juri Lotman, the Japanese semantics scholar Toshihiku Isutzu, and the literary critic E. D. Hirsch. Nevertheless, my aim here is not to delve into his use of this kind of sources but, rather, to draw attention to his intellectual background in classical Islamic thought. I intend to show that, besides his adaptation of modern and contemporary hermeneutics, Abū Zayd draws on three intellectual branches of classical Islam in which textual criticism was already being applied and, thus, made the bridge to hermeneutics and contemporary semiotic and semantic theories easier.

These three branches are firstly, the Muʿtazila, a rationalist theological school; secondly, the philosophical Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī; and, finally, Shiite Qurʾānic exegesis. His use of these three branches is not accidental. In 1977, Abū Zayd wrote his MA dissertation on the Qurʾānic metaphor in the Muʿtazila (*Qaḍiyyat al-Majāz fī al-Qurʾān ‘inda al-Muʿtazila*). Shortly thereafter, in 1981, he wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the Qurʾānic interpretation of Ibn ʿArabī (*Taʾwil al-Qurʾān ‘inda Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī*). These two works mark the beginning of his interest in the idea of text (*naṣṣ*) and its relationship with its interpreters. Finally, his proximity with some aspects of Shiite exegesis, as he mentions in some of his works, allowed him, in a similar vein to Ibn ʿArabī and the Sufis, to explore in detail the idea of a text open to different levels of interpretation.

Abū Zayd's early Islamic background was enormously influential in his later ideas. It prepared the ground for considering the Qurʾān as a text, rather than the container of an immutable divine message, as is understood by what he calls extremists (*mutaṭarrifāt*). In emphasizing the foundations of Abū Zayd's hermeneutics, I aim to show that his method revitalizes some Islamic classical sources that also sought to establish a proper method for interpreting the Qurʾān. Indeed, each of these sources has also its internal difficulties as does the way Abū Zayd interprets them. Nevertheless, I think that despite the limitations that Abū Zayd sees in those sources, from them he extracts relevant considerations regarding the Qurʾān as text and the role of its interpreters,

resulting in an original hermeneutics that, as I shall show in my conclusions, becomes controversial if it is not well understood.

The work in which Abū Zayd best describes his method is the *Critique of Religious Discourse* (*Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-dīnī*). He began writing parts of this work during a stay between 1985 and 1989 as a visiting scholar at Osaka University in Japan. In this same period, he wrote *The Concept of the Text: A Study of the Qurʾānic Sciences* (*Mahfūm al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsa fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*), in which he took up the problem of Qurʾānic interpretation in the Muʿtazilites and the Sufis. In this work, he realized that both were influenced by their sociopolitical contexts and therefore interpreted the Qurʾān accordingly. This means that every interpretation is determined by a series of ideological presuppositions. Just as in the classical period there were strong disagreements between Muʿtazilites, Ashʿarites, Hanbalites, Sufis, etc., the ideological confrontations in modern Egypt reflected a similar situation: each political group dealing with the text according to their own ideological presuppositions. The imposition of ideological interpretations inspired Abū Zayd to write the first chapter of the *Critique of Religious Discourse*: "Contemporary Religious Discourse: Its Strategies and Intellectual Premises" (*al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī al-Muʿāṣir: Āliyyātuh wa Munṭalaqātuh al-Fikriyya*).

In this first chapter, Abū Zayd criticizes a common distinction well established in the media, namely that of those whose discourse is moderate (*muʿtadil*) and those whose discourse is extremist (*mutaṭarrif*). He argues that the only difference between these two positions is one of degree and they share the same intellectual premises: (1) they conflate religious ideas with religion eliminating the gap between subject and object; (2) they explain all phenomena, whether social or natural, by reference to a first cause; (3) they rely on the authority of the early Muslims of the past (*turāth*), after converting the heritage texts (that is, secondary texts) into primary texts; (4) they are dogmatic, that is, they reject any intellectual diversity, except on detail and particular matters, but not concerning principles or fundamentals; (5) they dismiss the historical dimension and they regret having lost the idealized past, whether it could be the age of the rightly-guided caliphates or the caliphate of the Ottoman sultans (Abū Zayd 2010, 38 – 39). Abū Zayd observes that in any religious problematic situation, moderate Islamists formulate arguments recurring to traditional sources dismissing their historicity, while the extremists rely on the early Muslims and the tradition confusing human reasoning with dogmatic Islam.

The *Critique of Religious Discourse* was finally completed and published in 1994. In what follows, I deal firstly with Abū Zayd's understanding of the

notion of interpretation (taʾwil) in that book. Secondly, I refer to his use of classical theological and philosophical sources, pointing out their particularities, their internal problems, and some polemic aspects in the way in which Abū Zayd interprets them. Finally, I conclude that Abū Zayd's use of those classical sources, allows him to assert the idea that the Qurʾān should be treated as a text, an idea that opens the door to contemporary hermeneutics and other semiotic and semantic approaches. I also explain why the extremists have misunderstood Abū Zayd's Qurʾānic hermeneutics.

I. Abū Zayd on the Notion of Interpretation (*taʾwil*)

In the second chapter of the *Critique of Religious Discourse*, Abū Zayd delves into the notion of "interpretation" (*taʾwil*) He argues that this notion needs to be clearly defined given that the term has been used so broadly. Abū Zayd is interested in recovering its original aim, namely, the interpretation of religious texts. He thus clarifies the Arabic term *taʾwil*. In ordinary Arabic the term has two senses: on the one hand, means to send back something to its primary or original cause; on the other hand, it could mean to reach an objective through managing, governing, or reforming (Abū Zayd 2018, 138 – 139; see also Corbin 2001, 9). Both senses appear in the Qurʾān in the same story, namely, the story of Yūsuf. The first sense appears in several passages such as Qurʾān 12:21 ("This is how We established Yūsuf in the land, so that We might teach him the *interpretation* of dreams"), or Qurʾān 12:43 – 56 when the Egyptian king asks Yūsuf to interpret a dream he had in which seven fat cows are eaten by seven skinny ones, and seven green ears of gran are replaced by other seven dry. Yūsuf provides an interpretation of the dream and, later, in Qurʾān 12:100, this interpretation is fulfilled, referring, thus, to the second sense of the term *taʾwil*. Abū Zayd concludes that the Arabic triliteral root *a-w-l* from which the term *taʾwil* derives contains two opposing meanings that are related to each other as cause and effect. I would say that the first sense delves into the primary meaning of the king's dream and the second is the recognition of its fulfillment.

The term *taʾwil* has also a technical sense that, among scholars, is usually compared with another technical term, *tafsīr*. Concerning the use of these technical terms, Abū Zayd makes an important remark: while *tafsīr* is associated with *riwāya* (transmission), *taʾwil* is associated with *dirāya* (rational appreciation). In other words, while *tafsīr* is closely connected to how the tradition has been unraveling and interpreting the sense of Qurʾānic passages, *taʾwil* implies personal reasoning and inferences. Indeed, both *taʾwil* and *tafsīr* need not only the perfect knowledge of the Arabic language but also the knowledge

of all sciences related to the study of the Qurʾān (2018, 139). Although Abū Zayd does not break down each of these sciences, he is referring to those disciplines that allow interpreters to recognize the period to which each sura corresponds, the purposes of each of their verses, their connotations, and how other interpreters have understood them.

Abū Zayd admits that training in these disciplines is necessary for interpreting the Qurʾān avoiding the intromission of personal ideology. When interpretation becomes ideological, there is a leap to what Abū Zayd calls "coloring" or, in terms of traditional scholarship, "specious interpretation." With these terms, traditional Sunni scholars usually refer to the Shiite interpretations. However, as Abū Zayd observes, the discrimination of Shiite interpretations and the acceptance, for instance, of some Sufi approaches, manifests, in the case of traditional scholars, their tendentious reading. Abū Zayd argues that to avoid tendentious interpretations, one should engage with the texts from two perspectives. The first one is the historical perspective in a sociological sense, that is, the interpreters need to consider the text in its own context to discover their original sense. This first perspective is usually known as 'contextualism' and includes, as Abū Zayd mentions, linguistic contextualism, a crucial aspect that was also relevant for the Muʿtazilites. Abū Zayd emphasizes the historicity of the language in which a text was written, in this case, as it is obvious, the Arabic, and how language is related to the historicity of concepts. The second perspective takes into consideration the current social and cultural context of the interpreters (2018, 142 – 143). Put in other terms, the text has a meaning in its own context and contemporary interpreters should look for the significance that can be derived from its original meaning.

The previous distinction is interesting from an epistemological point of view: Abū Zayd holds that the text has a meaning (*maʿnā*) and a significance (*maghzā*). Contextualism constitutes, as I understand Abū Zayd's stance, a method to approach the meaning of the text in its own context avoiding arbitrary or abusive interpretations. There is, however, a second perspective when current interpreters recognize that the interpretation and significance of the text change over time, even in the current context. The search for the meaning can be problematic since competing interpretations can be formulated at different times. Abū Zayd thinks that, indeed, scholars have the right to interpret the texts according to their methodologies independently of whether their interpretations are progressive or reactionary. Nevertheless, what he condemns is

> …the treatment of interpretation of texts from a self-interested, opportunistic perspective that ignores, on the one hand, the fact that they operate in their historical context and, on the other hand, treats with disdain facts and data that are indispensable to uncovering the meaning of the texts (Abū Zayd 2018, 143).

When scholars or interpreters commit this kind of abuse on the text, their interpretations become arbitrary and "…the leap from interpretation to coloring is easy, and the lines between meaning and significance are blurred" (Abū Zayd 2018, 140).

Abū Zayd holds that meaning and significance need to be separated when interpreting the texts. However, despite both must be distinguished from each other, they should not be absolutely dissociated. In fact, the significance steers aspects of the meaning. Abū Zayd explains that meaning and significance

> …run in parallel with the two usages of the term *taʾwil* in ordinary language ….Discovering the meaning means going back to the source, whereas discovering the significance is the objective of reading, and the two senses, on the linguistic and technical levels, converge through the morphology of the term, which has the form of the verbal noun of the second form of the verb, implying frequentative action through the germination of the second radical in the finite form of the verb. That means that *taʾwil* is an action that repeatedly moves between a starting point and an endpoint, or between the meaning and the significance, rather like the movement of a pendulum, and not a movement in one direction. It is a movement that starts with reality/significance and sets out to discover the meaning of the text/the past. Then the meaning goes back to lay a foundation for the significance and adjust the starting point (Abū Zayd 2018, 145).

It is necessary to discover the meaning and the significance of the text. The text has a meaning of its own and it is not something constructed by the reader. Discovering the meaning of the text consists of using interpretative tools, namely, all sciences related to the study of the Qurʾān. It also implies understanding the text in its context or, in other words, discovering its historical meaning (*dalāla tārīkhiyya*). However, the aim of interpreting the text is not to establish a definitive meaning as if the Qurʾān contained a fixed message. The historical meaning of the text allows us to understand how the text was read by earlier generations. This diachronic understanding of the text is crucial in Abū Zayd's theory of interpretation. However, he states that it is necessary to go beyond the meaning to understand its significance. The distinction between

meaning and significance has a temporal connotation: the interpreter must understand what the text meant in the past to understand what it means in the present. The extremists do not contextualize the text, they disregard its historical meaning and treat it as if it has a fixed meaning. Previously, I referred to the premises that extremists and moderates share and, precisely, premise number five is the dismissal of the historical dimension of the text. By "extremists" Abū Zayd is referring to the Salafists and their attempt to go back to the original sources, that is, the Qurʾān and the *sunna*, avoiding subsequent innovative interpretative developments of the text such as those of the *mutakallimūn* and the *falāsifa*, the theologians and the philosophers. Extremists assume that the Qurʾānic text is eternally valid and, hence, its teachings must be applied literally.

For Abū Zayd it is enormously relevant to consider the interpretative development of the Qurʾān. From its initial stage, the prophetic message needs interpretation. The first interpreter of the Islamic revelation was the prophet Muhammad when transmitting and explaining the prophetic message to the community. After Muhammad's death, it became necessary to explain that which is unclear or not mentioned in the prophetic message contained in the Qurʾān. Promptly, exegetical schools emerged and began to practice *tafsīr*. Among the most important exegetical schools, there is the Makkah School, the School of Medina, the School of Kufah, and the School of Baṣra. All these schools based their interpretations on their self-opinions trying to remain faithful to the prophetic legacy.

This is not the place to provide a detailed history of the evolution of *tafsīr*. I simply want to draw attention to the School of Baṣra and its founder, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), whose ideas were adopted by the Muʿtazilites. Some sources state that it was he who referred to one of his disciples, Wāṣil ibn ʿAta, as 'the separated', indicating that he was developing distinct ideas from those of his teacher. While this story is not universally believed, it perfectly portrays the tendency of the Muʿtazilites to think for themselves and not rely on religious authorities. The Muʿtazilites defended an interpretation of the Qurʾān mainly based on reason, and they taught that it was possible to know the Qurʾānic message and even God Itself through reason. Among the different innovative ideas they held, one is particularly important for our discussion, namely, their view that the Arabic language was conventional (*iṣṭilāḥ*). This conventionalist position on language endorsed the necessity of the human interpretation of the Qurʾān, challenging the literalism advocated by the traditionalists, represented mainly by the Ḥanbalites. It is clear why Abū Zayd sees in the

Muʿtazilites the foreshadowing of a theory of interpretation in which the Qurʾān can be treated as text and not as the container of a fixed and immutable message.

II. The Notion of *Taʾwil* in Abū Zayd's Classical Sources

There is consensus in considering the Muʿtazilites as the founders of *ʿilm al-kalām*, a discipline usually translated as 'theology', though it means the science of religious discourse. *Kalām* should be understood as a philosophical theology. While the Qurʾān states Islamic dogmas but does not prove them, *kalām*, especially the rationalist version of the Muʿtazilites, provides reasons and arguments to support and make sense of religious beliefs. *Kalām* was the first attempt to interpret the Qurʾān systematically. The Muʿtazila was for a time the official school of the Abbasid caliphate. However, it began to decline around the 12th century when another theological school, the Ash'arites, put an end to what they considered their interpretative excesses. Despite the decline of the Muʿtazilites as a school and religious movement, some of their views survived among the Shiite branches known as the Zaydis and the Twelver Shiites (Ansari 2016; Ansari – Schmidtke 2016). It is not surprising, therefore, that Abū Zayd finds some similitudes between Muʿtazilites and Shiites.

Abū Zayd holds that the Muʿtazilites were influenced by Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, Muʿtazilism emerged shortly before the circulation of Greek philosophical texts translated into Arabic. It could be, however, that early Muʿtazilites had an indirect influence of Greek philosophy through the theological debates with Middle Eastern Christians. While it has been discussed whether early Muʿtazilites had direct contact with philosophical texts, it is relatively easy to recognize some philosophical influences in later Muʿtazilites. I further agree with Abū Zayd that the Muʿtazilite theory of interpretation is thoroughly philosophical since it involves an ontology, an epistemology, and a theory of language (2011, 55 – 59). Briefly put, for the Muʿtazilites, the Qurʾān has been created and it is not an eternal attribute of God, as more traditionalist thinkers such as the Ash'arites and the Hanbalites teach. This ontological position has epistemological consequences: the Qurʾānic discourse is not the exclusive domain of God but is also in the realm of human reason. Finally, the Muʿtazilite conception of language as something conventional leads to a theory of interpretation in which the Qurʾānic text is the basis for extracting a series of significances from which doctrinal principles are rationally formulated.

For most Muʿtazilites, God produced the Qurʾān for the believers, and through this book He exerts the acts of enunciating, talking, commanding, and prohibiting; it is composed of words and, language, as mentioned, is something conventional, that is, sounds performed and produced by human speakers. As is well-known the conventionalist conception of language implies that the meanings of words are established by consensus and, therefore, meaning is a consequence of the use of the word and not the reverse; that is, we do not express meanings through words, but we utter sounds that become words that subsequently acquire a meaning. Thus, language is a precondition for establishing meanings. This conception of language has controversial implications: given that the prophetic message has been transmitted using the same language ordinary people use, the meaning of the prophetic message of the Qurʾān can only be established once God's speech is externalized through his messenger, namely, the prophet Muhammad. Divine speech begins to exist when it has been 'materialized' in sounds and letters whose meaning is established once it is externalized, but not prior to its externalization. Hence, God did not previously establish from all eternity the meaning of the Qurʾān; rather it is something created when the language emerged, and its meanings need to be established by means of interpretation. As can be seen, the Muʿtazilites had already put forward the idea of treating the Qurʾān as a text open to interpretation and not with a fixed meaning. The most representative example of the Muʿtazilite position, even for Abū Zayd, is ʿAbd al-Jabbār (see 1961; also López-Farjeat 2021).

But let us now turn to the influence of Ibn ʿArabī on Abū Zayd. Besides his doctoral dissertation on Ibn ʿArabī's interpretation of the Qurʾān, later, in 2002, he wrote another book, *Thus Spoke Ibn ʿArabī* (*Hākadhā Takallama Ibn al-ʿArabī*), in which he presents Ibn ʿArabī as an intellectual who challenged the authority of the traditionalists proposing a more liberating approach to the Qurʾān, that is, a Sufi approach. In the sixth chapter, he deals with the interpretation of religious law and deals with a typically Sufi subject (also very present in Shiite exegesis), namely, the dialectic between the literal (*ẓāhir*) and the hidden (*bāṭin*) meaning of the Qurʾān. The distinction between these two levels is suggested in the Qurʾān itself but with different terminology. One of the most representative passages in this regard is Qurʾan 3:7:

> It is He Who has sent down to you the Book. In it are verses that are entirely clear (*muḥkam*), which are the Mother of the Book, and others not entirely clear (*mutashābih*). As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth],

they follow that which is not entirely clear seeking temptation and seeking interpretation (*taʾwil*).

This passage distinguishes between those verses that can be understood literally and others that require interpretation. Among several other passages, there is one that is particularly illustrative since the Qurʾān is said to be a hidden book, this time using the term *maknūn* (Qurʾān 56:78). In sum, the Qurʾān itself indicates the need for the reader to transcend the literal sense. However, the exegetical challenge goes far beyond historical-contextual issues. The Qurʾān makes use of symbols, metaphors, and allegories, that need interpretation. Indeed, Ibn ʿArabī has an immense exegetical work – just think of his monumental work *The Meccan Openings* (*al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya*) (1972 – 1991) – that is impossible to discuss in detail here. Like Henri Corbin, Abū Zayd argues that interpretation understood as *taʾwil* is a keystone in Ibn ʿArabī's thought. In the previous section, I showed that he distinguishes between *taʾwil* and *tafsīr*, connecting *taʾwil* with rational appreciation, and *tafsīr* with transmission. Abū Zayd prefers the sense of *taʾwīl* and he even suggests that the term could be translated as "hermeneutics."

Abū Zayd assumes, perhaps following Corbin, that when Ibn ʿArabī mentions 'interpretation', he refers to *taʾwil*. William Chittick has noticed that Ibn ʿArabī does not always use the term in the positive sense in which Corbin understands it. Chittick holds that Corbin employs the term *taʾwil*, because it was of primary importance for the Shiites and, given Corbin's strong inclination towards Shiite thought, the link between Ibn ʿArabī and the Shiites responds to his own convictions (Chittick 1989, 199 – 200). Chittick observes that Ibn ʿArabī often identifies the term *taʾwil* with the rationalistic thinkers, that is, the *mutakallimūn* and the *falāsifa*. Instead of understanding, as those thinkers, *taʾwil* as deductive reasoning, Ibn ʿArabī considers *taʾwil* as interpreting the text without imposing reason or compromising the meaning of the text. Abū Zayd, for his part, considered that Chittick was right in realizing that Ibn ʿArabī avoids using the term *taʾwil*. However, he kept his view according to which Ibn ʿArabī was deeply involved in applying *taʾwil* (2011, 61, n. 32). In my view, Ibn ʿArabī's approach to the Qurʾān could be considered as a form of *taʾwil* while recognizing the limitations of reason. However, indeed, Ibn ʿArabī was reluctant to apply this term and preferred to use the Sufi notion of *ishārāt* (allusions) (Abū Zayd 2011, 61).

Ibn ʿArabī thinks that the interpreter needs to penetrate several levels of interpretation. The interpreter starts from the strictly literal level, that is, from

linguistic, grammatical, and historical aspects of the Qurʾān, and from there progresses to the allegorical character by gradually deciphering its hidden meaning. This process of deciphering or unveiling transcends the interpretation of the external signs and even leads to a kind of spiritual transfiguration of the interpreter. This would consist, in simple words, of a kind of substitution of his own way of understanding the Qurʾān by an internalization of the meaning of the text. For Ibn ʿArabī, the interpreter needs to discover the different levels of the text, until he reaches what could be called experiential or presential knowledge (*maʿrifa*). While Ibn ʿArabī intends to reach this experiential and spiritual level, the literal meaning of the Qurʾān must be always present. This means that the other levels of interpretation do not substitute the literal meaning; rather, the different meanings preserve the literal sense but add new ways of knowing and understanding the text.

This approach is to some extent very close to that of some Shiites, since for them the literal sense cannot exist without interpretation, and without interpretation, there would be nothing that would have to be manifested through the text; on the other hand, without the literal sense, the different levels of interpretation could never be unveiled. As can be seen, the interpretation of the Qur'ān for the Shiites also has several dimensions or levels. However, in this case, the only one who can access the hidden meaning is the spiritual guide or imam. Although Abū Zayd does not agree with the central role of the imam, he shows appreciation for the Shiite notion of *taʾwil*, while finding similarities, as Corbin does, between Ibn ʿArabī and Shiism (Corbin 2001, 292 – 293).

Among the different levels of interpretation, Ibn ʿArabī does not rule out rational interpretations but considers them to be limited. Furthermore, he provides an account of several preconditions that any interpreter must meet: the adherence to religious law and the tradition of the prophet, as well as piety, fear of God, respect for previous interpretations aligned with the tradition, etc. While Ibn ʿArabī is far from being rationalist, he assumes that the text may have different interpretations without substituting its literality, which, in my view, could be understood as its contextuality. I think that this is the premise that Abū Zayd is interested in recovering: the interpreter has access to the literal or objective meaning of the text but as mentioned earlier, a step must be taken towards a different level that Abū Zayd calls "significance." Now, in the *Critique of Religious Discourse*, he is not interested in discussing the different levels of Ibn ʿArabī's theory of interpretation; there, he focuses on something previous, that is, the notion of text (*naṣṣ*) (2018, 117 –120). Ibn ʿArabī agrees

with other classical schools that, while there are verses that require interpretation, there are others that allow for only one meaning and, therefore, do not need to be interpreted. Abū Zayd observes that the problem with this conception of the text is that the discrimination of verses that allow only one meaning has been a matter of disagreement. As a result, tendentious interpreters, whether extremists or moderates, seek to immobilize the meaning of the text, banning independent thought, and relying only on the authority of the early Muslims of the past. By contrast, despite his commitment to a classical conception of the text, Ibn ʿArabī would be an example of someone trying to find a balance between the literal traditional meaning and new interpretations or significances.

In sum, the Muʿtazilites took the first step in considering the Qurʾān as a text, emphasizing the relevance of language. In addition, Ibn ʿArabī and certain forms of Shiism hold that the text has a literal sense (a contextual meaning) open to a plurality of interpretations. What can be recognized in these classical sources are the first foundations for establishing what could be considered Qurʾānic hermeneutics.

III. Conclusion: A Bridge to Contemporary Hermeneutics

Abū Zayd states that adopting the structure of the Muʿtazilie theology would have been enough to achieve partial fulfillment of the interpretative renewal of the Qurʾān (2018, 193). He argues that "the Muʿtazilite position is a historical landmark that foreshadows something of scholarly and progressive significance, and it is that significance, not the historical landmark, that interests us in order to lay a basis for awareness of the nature of religious texts" (2018, 241 – 242). In the Muʿtazilites, Abū Zayd found a linguistic theory close to contemporary semiotics: language belongs to a cultural structure that has emerged in a specific context; thus, every text, even religious texts, is strongly attached to the linguistic system in which it has been produced (2018, 236 – 237). Put simply, Abū Zayd adopts the conception of the Qurʾān as a text composed of words and signs arranged according to certain grammatical rules that are intended to express a meaning. However, the Qurʾān is not the bearer of just any meaning but of Islamic prophetic revelation. Abū Zayd adopts the Muʿtazilite stance according to which the prophetic revelation took place in time, in a very specific context, but it has been the subject of diachronic interpretations. This means, in other words, that the Qurʾān has gone through several reinterpretations despite the efforts of some extremist groups to keep the text intact. As I showed earlier,

contextualism plays a key role in Abū Zayd's hermeneutics and consists of understanding the text in its context and literality but then moving diachronically towards new interpretations.

Abū Zayd was aware that establishing a method of interpretation in which the starting point was to consider the Qurʾān as a text depending on the rules of a conventional language, was disrupting among extremist groups who conceive the Qurʾānic message, that is, the divine Word, as eternal and immutable. Abū Zayd considers the Qurʾān as a text, thus open to interpretation, without discarding its literality. In this regard, Ibn ʿArabī's philosophical Sufism and Shiite interpreters help him maintain that new interpretations do not suppress the literal sense. However, Abū Zayd goes further than these interpreters by stating that there is no difference between religious texts and any other texts. Even considering their divine origin, religious texts do not require a special or different method from that used for any other texts (2018, 241). In this point, Abū Zayd does distance from the Sufis, for whom "religious texts are transformed into texts that are impenetrable to ordinary humans" (2018, 241).

Abū Zayd pursues a method that avoids impenetrable, authoritative, and, above all, ideological interpretations. For this purpose, he brings Qurʾānic interpretation to the level of strictly textual analysis. He tries to align his interpretation of classical sources with modern and contemporary semiotics, semantics, and hermeneutics, which also assume that religious texts are a set of signs and words open to interpretation. However, as was the case with the Muʿtazilites, this approach to the Qurʾānic text could be controversial if it is not well understood. Against the extremist condemnation, I do not believe that Abū Zayd's treatment of the Qurʾān as a text jeopardizes its divine origin. He never ruled out the divine origin of the Book. On the contrary, he clearly stated that

> Islam is a "message" revealed from God to man through the Prophet Muhammad, who is the Messenger of God and who is himself human. The Qurʾān is very clear about that. A message represents a communicative link between a sender and a receiver through a code or a linguistic system. Because the sender in the case of the Qurʾān cannot be the object of scientific study, the scientific introduction to the analysis of the text of the Qurʾān can only take place through its contextual reality and its contextual milieu (Abū Zayd 2008, 158).

As can be seen, Abū Zayd explicitly affirms that his treatment of the Qurʾān does not attempt against its divine status. In the *Critique of Religious Discourse*, he holds that "The Qurʾān is a sacred text as far as its content is concerned, but it becomes intelligible through what is relative and variable, in other words through human beings" (2018, 119). Abū Zayd advocates a human religious discourse that stimulates a diversity of interpretations showing the human efforts to avoid the denigration of Islam. Using religious discourse as a political instrument, whether from an extremist or moderate stance, is precisely a way of denigrating Islam. By contrast, the dialogical study of the text allows us to renew and recontextualize the Qur'ānic message, making religion a living experience able to respond to the challenges of changing times. I think that Abū Zayd's Qurʾānic hermeneutics points towards this living conception of religion. Although this hermeneutics draws from various sources, here I have emphasized its classical foundations as an example of the revitalization of the classical Islamic intellectual tradition.

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