Ambiguity in the Qur'ān

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After receiving my MA in Arabic language and Qur'ānic studies at Cairo University, I have enrolled at the Faculty of Theology as a member of the "*Ambiguity and Precision in the Qur'ān*" project that is housed at the Section of Biblical Studies and funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research. Within that project, I am working on my PhD thesis, "Ambiguity in the Qur'ān", dealing with the phenomenon of ambiguity in Islam's holy scripture. "Ambiguity", according to Katie Wales's *Dictionary of Stylistics*, is double (or multiple) meaning, an ambiguous expression has more than one interpretation.

The research problem

In public as well as academic discourses, the Qur'ān is often described as a difficult and bewildering text. It contains puzzling words, and its sentences are very complex. As for the Qur'ānic narrative, there are not enough references to time and place. As for the composition of the Qur'ān, there is no obvious principle standing behind its composition either in one chapter or in the whole book. Altogether, according to these discourses, the Qur'ān is ambiguous, and this ambiguity is a fundamental defect in the text.

To a certain extent, the views referred to above mainly derive from Western Qur'ānic studies. However, the Islamic exegetical tradition has also acknowledged the complexity in the Qur'ān whether in its diction, grammatical structures, or in its tropes (i.e. metaphors and similes). Most of the traditional Qur'ānic scholars have discussed issues like strange words of the Qur'ān (*gharīb al-Qur'ān*), problematic verses of the Qur'ān (*mushkil al-Qur'ān*), and the ambiguity of the Qur'ān (*mutashābih al-Qur'ān*). The main aim of those scholars was to disambiguate the ambiguity considering this ambiguity as an accusation that should be answered.

Both perceptions, Western and Islamic, of Qur'ānic ambiguity, have misconstrued it. In this project, ambiguity in the Qur'ān will not be perceived as a defect or an accusation. Rather, attention will

be directed towards the possible subtle rhetoric of this ambiguity.

Methodology

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the realm of literary criticism, the concept of ambiguity has changed considerably from a fault that should be avoided, to a virtue that could be desirable. Although the Qur'ān has been widely studied by literary methods, this conceptual change in the perception of ambiguity has not been utilized by Qur'ānic scholars.

In 1930, William Empson presented the first landmark of the theoretical-practical treatment of ambiguity under the new paradigm i.e. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Empson stated from the beginning of his book that "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" forms ambiguity and argued that ambiguity is an effective tool for evaluating the richness of literary meaning. Empson's work has provoked other critics to investigate ambiguity, like Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris in "Aesthetic Ambiguity", in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1948, Vol. 8 p.415. Ambiguity had become a key concept for critics interested in the complexity and multiplicity of meaning whether in the time of Empson, or in the late twentieth century where deconstructionists presented their works on "indeterminacy", "re-rereading" and "misreading" (e.g. Jacque Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, 1978, and Marjorie Perloff in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 1981). The progress made within modern literary studies in studying literary ambiguity provides us with exegetical approaches that can be highly effective in investigating Qur'ānic ambiguity.

Examples and Reflections

The project begins with investigating the ambiguous Qur'ānic material on two basic levels: the lexical and the grammatical.

On the lexical level, the Qur'ān has words such as *zaqqūm*, *ghislīn,* and *ʾabb* whose meanings were unknown even to the ancient Arabs themselves, in addition to very general words such as *ʾamr*. The direct meaning of the word *ʾamr* is "order" but besides this meaning, the Qur'ān uses it in other meanings such as "matter" in Q.2:210, "case" in Q.2:275, "decision" in Q.3:128, "affair" in Q.3:147, "authority" in 4: 59, and "deed" in Q.5: 95. The Qur'ān also involves polysemous words such as *rab* which is used, in Arabic, in the sense of "God", "king", or "owner" (Ibn Manẓūr 2010, 1/384). The point here is to discover the rhetorical effect of every "ambiguous" word. For example, the word *rab* has been skillfully used in Q.12, *Joseph* (*Yusuf*), where the reader cannot be certain whether it means "God" or "king", and this uncertainty gives the story deeper meanings.

On the grammatical level, the Qur'ān rarely follows the standard grammatical structure of Arabic. It utilizes many linguistic techniques that generate ambiguity. In the following lines, I will present an example that proves that ambiguity in the Qur'an can be a source of literary richness, not a source of puzzlement.

In Q.57:27, there is a significant example that illustrates how the Qur'ānic sentence could be ambiguous:

> *"… Wa jaʿalnā fī qulūbi lladhīna ttabaʿūhu raʾfatan wa-raḥmatan wa-rahbāniyyatan ʾibtadaʿūhā mā katabnāhā ʿalayhim ʾillā ʾbtighāʾa riḍwāni llāh…"*
> "*… And We [God] set in the hearts of those who followed him [Jesus] tenderness and mercy. And monasticism they invented -- We did not prescribe it for them -- only seeking the good pleasure of God …"* (translated by A. J. Arberry).

The position of word *rahbāniyyatan* produces two ways in reading (thus, interpreting) the verse: first, "We [God] set in the hearts of those who followed him [Jesus] tenderness, mercy and monasticism", second, which is adopted by the translator, "We [God] set in the hearts of those who followed him [Jesus] tenderness and mercy [only]. And they invented monasticism". The dispute here is the source of monasticism: either God who put it in their hearts, or the followers who invent it.

Exegetists who chose the first interpretation, where "monasticism has been put in their hearts by God", define the verb *ʾibtadaʿa* (in the phrase *ʾibtadaʿūhā,* they invented it) not as "they invented" or "they created", but as "they spoiled" (according to al-Qurṭubī in *Al-Jamiʿu li-ʾḥkām al-Qurʾān*). Thus, the meaning will be that God had put the monasticism in their hearts and they spoiled it to be another thing unlike what God wanted. Actually, the verb *ʾibtadaʿa* cannot be literally defined as "spoiled"; all Arabic and Qur'ānic dictionaries (such as *Lisān al-ʿArab* of Ibn-Manẓūr and *Mufradāt gharīb al-Qur'ān* of al-Aṣfahanī) define *ʾibtadaʿa* as "to create something that has not existed before". Thus, defining *ʾibtadaʿa* as "spoiled" could be considered as a figurative definition. However, this understanding may find support in the verse itself, in the phrase *mā katabnāhā ʿalayhim (*God did not prescribe monasticism for them) *ʾillā ʾbtighāʾa riḍwāni llāh* (only seeking God's pleasure). Since God prescribed monasticism for them, God had put it in their hearts initially.

The same phrase, *mā katabnāhā ʿalayhim ʾillā btighāʾa riḍwāni llāh* that I have described as an evidence of the first interpretation, comes to be also an evidence that supports the second interpretation, but only when considering the phrase *mā katabnāhā ʿalayhim* as an interjected phrase between *ʾibtadaʿūhā* and *ʾillā ʾbtighāʾa riḍwāni llāh.* Then, the meaning will be "That they invented monasticism – God did not prescribe for them – only seeking God's pleasure". The formulation of this phrase is well worth considering; it is very flexible, able to be negative and positive at once, but there is also a question well worth considering i.e., why did the Qur'ān choose this ambiguous attitude towards Christian monasticism?

The dispute over this verse has not been only because of its ambiguous structure but also because of the etymology of the word *rahbāniyyah* that can be pronounced/read as *ruhbāniyyah* (according to al-Māwardī in *Al-Nukat wa-ʾlʿuyūn*). Both pronunciations refer generally to monasticism, but the first one could refer to the feeling of fear. In Arabic, *al-rahbāniyyah* derives from the noun *al-rahb* (fear), and its adjective is *rahbān* (fearful). Thus, *al-rahbāniyyah*

is the act that is attributed to the fearful man, unlike *al-ruhbāniyyah*, which means the act that is attributed to *al-ruhbān,* the plural form of *rāhib* "monk". The pronunciation of *rahbāniyyah*, in this meaning, suggests a new interpretation like "We [God] set in the hearts of those who followed him [Jesus] tenderness, mercy and fear [of God]". This understanding is very probable in the sense that *rahbāniyyah,* in the meaning of fear, is harmonious with *tenderness* and *mercy* as feelings in the heart, unlike monasticism that includes hard physical activities (i.e. activities of asceticism), and it is also possible that this fear forced them to invent a hard kind of worship which is later named monasticism.

It is obvious how the verse seems like a mass of overlapping layers, and these layers of meaning may negate each other, illuminate each other or challenge each other. Our purpose here is to discover how the text contains all these meanings and utilizes them to create its unique poeticity and rhetoric.