

## Dr Sohaib Saeed

### From Qur'ānic Polyvalence to Meaningful Ambiguity

In the ninth of ten introductory chapters to his magnum opus *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa-l-Tanwīr*, the renowned twentieth-century Tunisian exegete Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr (1879–1973) argues at length that “All Meanings Indicated by the Quranic Text Should Be Considered Intended” by the Divine Speaker. His attitude to the openness of the Arabic scripture and the ontology of its interpretations may be compared constructively with theories expressed by various exegetes and by the medieval mystical thinker Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240). It may also be contrasted with the more limiting views of certain exegetes, such as the Indian advocate of structural coherence, Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930).

At the core of Ibn 'Āshūr's argument lies his perspective on the miracle of the Quran's eloquence, a significant aspect of which is its richness of meaning, i.e. that multiple layers of meaning are packed into relatively concise expressions. This, in turn, mandates reflection on the part of believers and their scholars, to apply its guidance to all relevant purposes. Although it is true that human literary compositions are analysed for their nuances and possible allusions, the question of 'speaker intent' has a different character in the context of Revelation, especially since the Quran is, by consensus, the highest authority for Islamic creed, law and ethics.

This paper will begin by outlining Ibn 'Āshūr's theory and its application to certain passages of the Quran, including examples which he gives in the ninth introduction. Then, building on the value of this argument for the richness of Quranic language, we propose a new analytical approach described as 'meaningful ambiguity'. The focus here is on such verses where scholars have advanced two (or more) competing interpretations: as well as the two meanings being intended, could the ambiguity hold its own signification, resulting in a metainterpretation greater than the sum of its parts?

Several examples will be raised for this proposition, and contrast made with Ibn 'Āshūr's own explanations. One such case is the famous debate over the syntax in Q 3:7, by which it is “only God” who knows the meaning of certain parts of the Quran, or “only God and those endowed with deep knowledge” – in addition to each being true in a certain way, is the ambiguity itself meaningful? A more specific case is Q 19:24, where scholars debated whether it was the Angel (Gabriel) who called out to Mary from below, or the baby Jesus – here, an argument will be made that these can be reconciled in a way which highlights the value of the Quran's polyvalency and indeterminacy.



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Dr. Sohaib Saeed is a scholar of Islamic studies specialising in Qur'ānic hermeneutics and *tafsīr*. He holds a PhD from SOAS, University of London, with earlier degrees from Al-Azhar University (BA in Tafsīr) and the University of Edinburgh (MSc in Philosophy).

He is Director of the Ibn 'Ashur Centre for Qur'ānic Studies and has held research and teaching roles at institutions including Bayyinah Foundation, the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Freiburg. His work focuses on Qur'ānic exegesis, translation, and digital scholarship.

Dr Saeed has translated and published key works on *tafsīr*, including *The Great Exegesis, Volume I: The Fātiḥa and Select Chapters of Itqān on the Language of the Qur'ān*. His forthcoming book, *Explaining the Qur'ān Through the Qur'ān*, explores intratextual *tafsīr* in both theory and practice. He has contributed articles and book chapters to leading academic journals and encyclopaedias on Islamic studies.

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