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MECHANISM OF THE CONTEXTUAL APPROACH IN THE EXEGESIS OF THE QUR'AN

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that the contextual approach is a contemporary linguistic methodology, particularly in modern semantics, which has played a significant role in the study of texts. Accordingly, these new mechanisms can be applied to the exegesis of the Qur'anic texts while maintaining adherence to the general principles of the Qur'anic interpretation. This article examines the contextual approach and its mechanisms for understanding both the clear and the elusive aspects of the Qur'an. It addresses a specific question: does the study of Qur'anic texts via a contextual approach yield a new semantic dimension distinct from prior approaches? Do these new mechanisms offer linguists potential solutions to issues that have proven problematic? Does this, in turn, enrich linguistic research in general and Qur'anic studies in particular? Moreover, is it possible to benefit from modern linguistic studies in applying the contextual approach to the exegesis of its verses while taking into account the peculiarity of the Qur'anic text as being "divine in origin," "Arabic in language," and "universal in message"?

KEYWORDS

Contextual Approach, Semantics, Qur'an, Exegesis, Linguistic Research

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Linguistic Definition of Context

Etymologically, the word *siyāq* (context) is derived from the linguistic root س ي ق; it is a verbal noun of ساق يسوق سوقاً, and its lexical sense refers to the indication of an event, namely, succession.¹ Al-Tahānawī states that *siyāq* in Arabic denotes "presentation."²

The phrase *هو يسوق الحديث* refers to the narration and sequence of the text. Thus, it is said that *أحسن سياق وإليك يساق الحديث* ("He narrates the discourse in the best sequence, and the discourse is presented to you"), *جئتكم بالحديث على سوفه على سرده* ("I have brought you the discourse in its proper sequence and narration").³

In modern lexicons, context is defined as "the environment of speech, its surroundings, and its coherence."⁴ Jean Dubois, in his *Dictionary of Linguistics*, defines context as "Context is the environment; it consists of the units that precede and follow a given unit."⁵

Ullmann expanded the concept of context, affirming that "on this interpretation, context ought to include not only the actual words and sentences that precede and follow but also the entire passage and even the book as a whole."⁶

Semantics and the Contextual Approach

Semantics, known today as the "contextual approach," is a methodology that assigns a decisive role to context in understanding texts, defines the meanings of words, and regulates their semantic scope. Contemporary linguists agree that a word's meaning is determined by its relationship with other words within the "discourse text." Firth explicitly stated that meaning becomes evident only through "contextualising the linguistic unit,"⁷ that is, placing it in different contexts. Consequently, the study of word meanings requires

the analysis of contextual patterns and the registers in which they appear, as the meaning of a word is shaped by the contexts in which it occurs.⁸

Types of Contexts According to Firth

Firth divides context into two types:

a. Linguistic context: This context encompasses phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic relations.

b. Situational context: This context pertains to the extralinguistic world related to linguistic discourse and includes social circumstances, the psychological environment, and the cultural settings of speakers or interlocutors.⁹

Levels of Context

The situational context itself is divided into two levels:

- The first is the smaller, partial context, which is the immediate environment surrounding the text under interpretation, such as a word within a sentence, a sentence within a verse, or a verse within the neighboring preceding and succeeding verses.

- The second is the larger, total general context, which is the entire Qur'anic context. The Qur'an possesses a distinct expressive method, innovative terminology not found elsewhere, and a unique balance between conciseness and clarity, absoluteness and specification, generality and particularity. Early exegetes recognised that an interpreter cannot dispense with harmonising these binary oppositions, through which comprehensive results emerge. These results are studied in light of the Qur'an's comprehensive context because, as it is said, the Qur'an explains itself.

Temporal Context

The temporal context refers to the circumstances of the discourse and its external circumstances, including what the exegetes have termed the reasons for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). This naturally involves considering the condition of the addressee and the purpose of the speaker.

Example of a smaller context in determining meaning

An example illustrating the use of a smaller context to clarify meaning is found in the verse:

(وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ، وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَنْ رَأَى بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ) [يوسف: 24]

"And indeed she [i.e., the wife of al-'Aziz] sought to seduce him, and he would have inclined to her had he not seen the proof of his Lord."

The exegete Abū Hayān al-Naḥwī al-Andalusī commented on this verse as follows: "Exegetes have long debated the meaning of these two occurrences of *hamma* ('he was inclined'). Some have ascribed to Joseph something that cannot be attributed to any individual of moral integrity. What I hold is that the noble Joseph never entertained such an inclination at all; indeed, this is negated by the vision of confirmation. It is similar to the expression: 'You came close to doing it if Allah had not protected you,' and it is incorrect to say that the response to *lawlā* ('if not for') comes before it, although there is no conclusive evidence to deny that. Rather, we say that the response to *lawlā* is omitted because the preceding phrase implies it, as the majority of the Basran grammarians say regarding the Arabic phrase: 'You are unjust if you do such-and-such,' where saying 'You are unjust' does not prove the existence of injustice. The findings of previous studies are not supported by Arabic usage here. We have purified this book and confined ourselves to what is indicated by the Arabic language and the flow of the verses."¹⁰

Accordingly, he concludes that the correct meaning is the negation of any inclination on the part of the noble Joseph, as clarified by the original syntactic construction, and finds no justification for disrupting the sequence of the verse.

Although Abū Hayān based his interpretation on the context of the verses, he assumed that the answer to *lawlā* ("if not for") was omitted, as implied by what preceded it. This assumption is worth considering; however, in my view, there is no need to postulate an omitted response. Instead, I hold that the negation of inclination on the part of Joseph comes only after a contrast established by the context. It does not diminish the stature of prophethood that fleeting thoughts may pass through the soul but that the actual response to instinct does not occur. The verse portrays the culmination of a prolonged situation of temptation attempts after Joseph initially refused and sought refuge. This represents a truthful and realistic depiction of the human soul's condition, oscillating between resistance and weakness, followed by reliance on God and, ultimately,

salvation. The Qur'anic context does not elaborate on these intertwined, conflicting, and prevailing human emotions because the Qur'anic methodology does not intend to focus excessively on this moment beyond its appropriate scope within the narrative and within the comprehensive reality of human life.¹¹

Another example of the role of context in uncovering meaning is found in the verse:

﴿أَيُّدُ أَحَدُكُمْ أَنْ تَكُونَ لَهُ جَنَّةٌ مِّنْ نَّحِيلٍ وَأَعْنَابٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ لَهُ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ وَأَصَابَهُ الْكِبَرُ وَلَهُ ذُرِّيَّةٌ ضِعْفًا (al-Baqarah 2:266). فَأَصَابَهَا إِعْصَارٌ فِيهِ نَارٌ فَاحْتَرَقَتْ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾

Narrated by al-Bukhārī in the exegesis of this verse, from Ibn 'Abbās, it is reported that 'Umar once asked the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ about the meaning of the verse ﴿أَيُّدُ أَحَدُكُمْ أَنْ تَكُونَ لَهُ جَنَّةٌ﴾. They replied, "Allah knows best." 'Umar became angry and said, "Say: 'We know' or 'We do not know.'" Ibn 'Abbās responded, "I have some understanding of it, O Commander of the Faithful." 'Umar said, "O my nephew, say it, and do not belittle yourself." Ibn 'Abbās said, "It is a parable for deeds." 'Umar asked, "What deeds?" Ibn 'Abbās replied, "The deeds of a rich man who obeys Allah Almighty, but then Allah sends Satan to him, and he commits sins until his deeds are destroyed."¹²

The difficulty 'Umar had with the verse's meaning was not due to ambiguous vocabulary but because of its intended purpose. Ibn 'Abbās clarified that the verse presents an allegory. If we consider the preceding context, we find Allah's words:

﴿يَتَأْتِيَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَبْطُلُوا صَدَقَاتِكُمْ بِالْمَنِّ وَالْأَذَى كَالَّذِي يُنْفِقُ مِمَّا لَهُ رِئَاءَ النَّاسِ وَلَا يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَمَثَلُهُ كَمَثَلِ صَفْوَانٍ عَلَيْهِ ثَرَابٌ فَأَصَابَهُ وَابِلٌ فَتَرَكَهُ صَلْدًا لَا يَقْدِرُونَ عَلَى شَيْءٍ مِمَّا كَسَبُوا وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْكَافِرِينَ ، وَمَثَلُ الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ ابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِ اللَّهِ (al-Baqarah 2:264-265). وَتَنْبِيئًا مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ كَمَثَلِ جَنَّةٍ بِرَبْوَةٍ أَصَابَهَا وَابِلٌ فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا شُجُورٌ فَكَانَتْ أَكْهًا ضِعْفَيْنِ فَإِنْ لَمْ يُصِبْهَا وَابِلٌ فَطُلَّ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ﴾

The first verse forbids nullifying charitable acts through boasting and harm, presenting a clear parable illustrating this. The second verse presents another explicit parable about the spender seeking Allah's pleasure, followed by an implicit parable warning against boasting, harm, and hypocrisy that can nullify one's deeds.

Identification of the referents of pronouns as exemplified in the verse:

﴿وَمَا أُبْرِئُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي إِنَّ رَبِّي غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ﴾ (Yūsuf 12:53).

The context indicates that this statement is from the wife of al-'Aziz, not from Joseph himself.¹³ This is because Joseph's speech had ceased, and the wife's speech began in connected sentences before the king, while Joseph was not present with her at that time but was summoned later. Ibn Kathīr comments, "The woman says, 'I do not absolve myself; indeed the soul commands towards evil except for those on whom my Lord has mercy, ' meaning those protected by Allah. My Lord is Forgiving and Merciful.' This interpretation is the most famous and suitable interpretation, as it is consistent with the story's context and meaning."¹⁴

Refutation of misconceptions and incorrect interpretations of some verses with superficial readings conflicting with their true meanings, such as the interpretation of the term *al-tahluka* ("destruction") in the verse:

﴿وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ﴾ (al-Baqarah 2:195),

which refers to rashly entering fields of battle and confronting the enemy. For example, it is narrated about al-Mughīra¹⁵ That was when 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb sent an army to besiege a fortress. A man from Bujayla fought valiantly and killed many, but most said he had thrown himself into destruction. When 'Umar heard this, he said, "They lied! Does not Allah say: ﴿وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَشْتَرِي نَفْسَهُ ابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ رَءُوفٌ بِالْعِبَادِ﴾ (al-Baqarah 2:207)? " Thus, 'Umar corrected the misunderstanding that people had regarding the meaning of the verse by placing it in its proper context.

This verse appears within a specific context that should not be isolated or used to argue solely from the apparent meaning of its wording. To do so would be to extract it from its original context and force upon it a meaning it does not inherently convey. The verse is preceded by others discussing fighting and the necessity of spending without restraint, as withholding is the ultimate ruin. Allah says:

﴿وَقَاتِلُوهُمْ حَتَّى لَا تَكُونَ فِتْنَةٌ وَيَكُونَ الدِّينُ لِلَّهِ فَإِنْ انْتَهَوْا فَلَا عُدْوَانَ إِلَّا عَلَى الظَّالِمِينَ ، الشُّهُرُ الْحَرَامُ بِالشُّهُرِ الْحَرَامِ وَالْحُرُمَاتُ

This command is for spending in the cause of Allah, meaning the path He has directed for combating the enemy among the polytheists by engaging in jihad. Allah rewards the spenders generously and provides them with sustenance promptly. If they withhold spending, the jihad is endangered because it requires preparation with money and equipment. Therefore, stinginess is called destruction (*hālāk*) and ruin (*tahluka*), which initially means the termination of something into corruption. Subsequently, Allah commands the community to give more and be more generous: "And do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good."

With respect to the true meaning, apparent linguistic evidence may indicate a specific meaning, but it is incomplete in relation to the actual reality of the meaning. Imam al-Zarkashī said, "Whoever confines himself to the apparent interpretation of the meaning of the words in language will find that insufficient for understanding the true realities of meanings. An example is the verse: ﴿وَمَا رَمَيْتْ إِذْ رَمَيْتْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ رَمَى﴾ (al-Anfāl 8:17), whose apparent interpretation is clear, but its true meaning is ambiguous because it affirms the act of throwing and negating it simultaneously, which is contradictory in appearance unless it is understood that it means He threw in one manner and did not throw in another."¹⁶

What precedes or follows a verse or even a word forms part of its meaning, which cannot be fully understood except through knowledge and comprehensive awareness of that context. This belongs to the category of verbal clues connected to the text, that is, within the same verse, through which the intended meaning becomes clear. Another example is the verse:

﴿وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ الْخَيْطُ الْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ الْخَيْطِ الْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ الْفَجْرِ﴾ (al-Baqarah 2:187).

Had the phrase *min al-fajr* ("from dawn") been omitted, the meaning would have been unclear and indefinite. This was the case when the verse was first revealed, as men would tie a white thread and a black thread around their leg and keep eating and drinking until they could distinguish between the two threads. Allah then revealed the phrase *min al-fajr*, making it clear that the reference was to the passage of night and day. The phrase "*min al-fajr*" is a verbal clue that reveals the intended meaning of the verse and clarifies its purpose.

While the context of the sentence or the smaller context is important, it is insufficient for a complete understanding of meaning and the interconnectedness of semantic fields within the text. This compels us to adhere to a concept of the text's wholeness by considering preceding and subsequent semantic clues, which is referred to as the sequential or cumulative coherence of the text. Although judging partial meanings in isolated sentences may be possible and acceptable, it is incorrect, limited in value, and insufficient when aiming to determine the meanings of the aggregate of sentences that constitute the text's structure, as the text does not permit the independent existence of its components. What precedes or follows a verse or even a word forms part of its meaning, which cannot be fully understood except through knowledge and comprehensive awareness of that context. This belongs to the category of verbal clues connected to the text, that is, within the same verse, through which the intended meaning becomes clear. Another example is the verse:

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Examples of Larger Contexts

The study of the positions of emphasis and deemphasis and the methods of "transmitting meanings through their expressions to the addressees as arranged in the speaker's mind according to their significance"¹⁷ reveals many rhetorical and semantic values. For example, in the verse:

﴿وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةً إِمْلَاقٍ تَحْنُ نَزْرُفُهُمْ وَإِنْ تَحْنُ نَزْرُفُهُمْ إِنْ قَبْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطَاً كَبِيراً﴾ (al-Isrā' 17:31),

The phrase "fear of poverty" refers to a specific condition and serves as an account of the practices of Arabs, who used to bury daughters out of shame and sometimes kill male children, fearing poverty and hardship. Allah admonishes them and informs them that He provides for them and their children. This noble verse indicates that Allah is more merciful to His servants than a parent is to their child, as He forbids killing children and commands inheritance for children, contrasting with pre-Islamic ignorance, where daughters were deprived of inheritance and killed. Therefore, Allah forbids killing children "out of fear of poverty," meaning

fear of eventually falling into destitution. Thus, the provision for them is mentioned first: "We provide for them and for you."

In Sūrah al-An'ām, Allah says:

(al-An'ām 6:151) وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ مِنْ إِمْلَاقٍ {

Here, provision for the parent is given precedence over provision for the child, addressing the concerns of the poor, who fear poverty caused by their children. The phrase *nahnu narzuqukum* ("We provide for you") means that Allah provides you with what will remove your poverty. Then, it adds "and them," indicating provision for all. This contrasts with the previous verse, where the provision of the child precedes that of the parent, addressing the wealthy who fear poverty resulting from their children.¹⁸ This fear pertains to something yet to occur, so the focus is on providing for the children, as provision for the parents is assured. Hence, the promise of provision for the children comes before the promise of provision for the parents.¹⁹

The difference between the two verses lies in the motivation for killing: in the phrase "*min imlāq*" ("from actual destitution"), the cause is actual poverty, whereas in "*khashyat imlāq*" ("fear of destitution"), the cause is anticipated poverty.²⁰ This distinction between the verses is fundamentally a difference in meaning resulting from the preposition or postponement of the phrase.

A review of the exegesis literature reveals that this broader context has not been sufficiently considered by most exegetes, even though the fundamental nature of the Qur'an is one of harmony and coherence, where parts are interrelated. Despite some exceptions suggesting a lack of suitability, it is incumbent upon the exegete to seek the contextual connections of verses whenever possible, but without affectation or undue strain.²¹

The contextual approach in interpretation prevents esoteric readings that subject the text to preconceived ideological convictions and judgments without foundation. The danger lies in the text becoming subordinate to the interpreter's mindset and ideological orientations. Scientific methodologies fundamentally hold that texts establish an understanding of ideas and the construction of beliefs, not the reverse.

Examples of Temporal Context in Determining Meaning

1. In the verse:

(Al 'Imrān 3:188) لَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ يَفْرَحُونَ بِمَا أَتَوْا وَيُجِبُونَ أَنَّ يُخْدَمُوا بِمَا لَمْ يَفْعَلُوا فَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّهُمْ بِمَفَازَةٍ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ {

When Marwān ibn al-Hakam found its meaning difficult, Ibn 'Abbās explained: "What is this verse to you? The Prophet ﷺ called upon the Jews and questioned them about something they concealed and reported falsely, wishing to be praised for what they did not do. They rejoiced in what they had hidden. Ibn 'Abbās then recited the preceding verse:

(Al 'Imrān 3:187) وَإِذْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِيثَاقَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ {

up to the words:

(Al 'Imrān 3:188) {يَفْرَحُونَ بِمَا أَتَوْا وَيُجِبُونَ أَنَّ يُخْدَمُوا بِمَا لَمْ يَفْعَلُوا}

Notably, Ibn 'Abbās, after mentioning the reason for revelation, indicated that the textual context also confirms it. The preceding verse speaks about the covenant Allah took from the People of the Book:

(Al 'Imrān 3:187) وَإِذْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِيثَاقَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ لَتُبَيِّنُنَّهُ لِلنَّاسِ وَلَا تَكْتُمُونَهُ فَنَبَذُوهُ وَرَاءَ ظُهُورِهِمْ وَاشْتَرَوْا بِهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا فَبُخْسَ مَا يَشْتَرُونَ {

2. In the verse:

(al-Nisā' 4:3) وَإِنْ جُفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُنْفِسُوا فِي النِّسَاءِ فَإِنَّكُمْ مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثَلِي وَثَلَاثَ وَرُبْعَ {

The connection between the fear of injustice to orphans and permitting marriage to more than one woman may not be obvious, but the reason for revelation clarifies this connection:

It was narrated from 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr that he asked 'Ā'isha about the verse, and she said, "An orphaned girl living with her guardian shares in his property. The guardian may desire to marry her without giving her a just dowry equal to what others receive, so marriage to them was prohibited except upon justice in dowry, and the command was to marry whatever women please you aside from them."²³

Conclusions

A renewed understanding of the Qur'an emerges from reflecting on the text and its overall context, both internal and external, as well as the integrative relationship between them. This can only be achieved through a practical examination of the verses via a revealing methodology that reveals the details surrounding the meaning of each verse and contributes to constructing a comprehensive picture of meaning.

This study has advocated the use of practical methods, examples, and procedures to benefit from the contextual approach in comprehending and interpreting the Qur'an. This approach, grounded in linguistics,

aids in extracting the hidden depths of verses and clarifying the purposes of the discourse through its various tools for comprehensively understanding Qur'anic texts within multiple linguistic contexts, including syntactic, morphological, lexical, and rhetorical contexts. These guide the understanding of the speaker's intended meaning and lofty aims through lucid verbal and semantic clues. In addition to the internal linguistic context, there is a situational or pragmatic context.

This contemporary approach has its foundations in the Islamic tradition, spanning various disciplines of the Qur'anic sciences, grammar, rhetoric, and principles of interpretation.

The research reached the following conclusions:

- The linguistic contextual method of interpretation requires the interpreter not to limit themselves to the meaning of a word but to extend to the syntactic structure and the position of the word among preceding and succeeding verses.

- The meaning of a sentence alone offers little compared with what the entire text conveys, as the text achieves semantic cohesion by linking its successive sentences; therefore, attention must also be given to the larger context, that is, the context of the whole text.

- The reasons for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) are among the most important contextual elements in understanding the Qur'anic text. Correctly understood, these encompass more than transmitted reports in the collections of ḥadīth; they include all matters related to the revelation of verses and the circumstances surrounding the prophetic traditions, including geographical and temporal factors accompanying the emergence of the divine text.

The study recommends initiating research projects applying the contextual method in the Qur'anic interpretation, considering the Qur'an's special characteristics as "divine in origin," "Arabic in language," and "universal in message."

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