

RESEARCH
ARTICLE**The Premises and Outcomes of Textual Interpretation in the Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd****Benmadi Fatima
Zohra**

Doctor

PhD in philosophy, University of Algiers 2

Algeria

Email: fatiphilo88@gmail.com; Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7178-7398>**Doi Serial**<https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.8.63>**Keywords**

hermeneutics, textual hermeneutics, religious text, Western sphere, Arab culture, methodology, sanctity, Arab renaissance project.

Abstract

Today, as intellectuals engaged with thought in its various horizons and outcomes, we have the right to question and engage in dialectical interaction with the various modern and contemporary Arab readings that have addressed issues of the religious text in terms of understanding, interpretation, and hermeneutics. The hermeneutic reading presented by the contemporary Arab thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is among the most prominent readings that sparked wide debate among Arab thinkers, given the methodological boldness he employed in dealing with the religious text. Anyone familiar with the approach adopted by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd experiences a sense of inquiry and attempts to understand the premises from which he started, as well as the outcomes he sought, when borrowing this method from the Western intellectual sphere into the realm of Arab-Islamic culture, in an attempt to construct and outline new hermeneutic features concerning the religious text. Consequently, he sought to approach the Qur'anic text as a historical text that differs from other texts produced by the human mind only in its source. In his view, this approach would allow the mind to understand the Qur'anic text in a satisfactory manner, free from the problem of sanctity and the complex of transcendence that cannot be surpassed or interrogated through the language of reason and reality. On this basis, this paper explores the heart of this issue according to the following problematic: How did Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd approach hermeneutics in the field of the Qur'anic text? What are the premises on which he based this reading? And what are the outcomes sought by Abu Zayd's project of textual hermeneutics?

Citation. Benmadi F. Z. (2025). The Premises and Outcomes of Textual Interpretation in the Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(8), 696–702.

<https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.8.63>

Issue: <https://imcra-az.org/archive/375-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-8-vol-8-2025.html>

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Received: 07.01.2025

Accepted: 04.05.2025

Published: 12.07.2025 (available online)

Introduction:

The religious text represents a general reference framework for Arab-Islamic thought, playing a central role in guiding the subsequent development of that thought. In reality, most religious currents hardly distinguish between religious heritage and religion, despite the fact that the religious text requires an objective, scientific reading that displaces any previous reading or interpretation that attempted to provide an understanding of religion. The concern of the Arab thinker has become to obtain the appropriate mechanisms by which intellectual progress can be achieved on the one hand, and to diversify intellectual achievements on the other. This is what some thinkers have done when they studied the historicity of the religious text with a new Islamic methodology.

Among the contemporary thinkers who worked on establishing visions and perspectives capable of forming a new methodology that transcends the traditional understanding of the text is Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, whose reading is considered one of the most important modern approaches presented for reading the religious text in the Arab cultural context. Abu Zayd was able to promote his ideological project (secularism) through that reading, as he took

the religious text as material for critical study by re-reading its contents and interpreting its texts based on methods and procedures emerging from modern and postmodern theories.

Therefore, Abu Zayd sought to reconsider our religious heritage in all its aspects and to attempt to read it through an objective hermeneutic approach. From this arises the following questions: What is the nature of hermeneutics in the thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd? What critical reading did he adopt in approaching the hermeneutics of the religious text? Is this methodological mechanism in hermeneutics justifiable? And can it be described as methodological creativity within the Arab-Islamic culture, or is it a revival of a previous experience outlined by some Arab secularists in the context of the Arab renaissance project?

The concept and nature of the text in the thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

The thinker focused on the issue of the primacy of the question concerning the nature of the Qur'anic text, pointing to the importance of investigating the concept of the Qur'anic text and exploring its essential nature. He stated: "Hence, the question about the being of the text in contemporary critical studies is an important and legitimate question. While the researcher had focused in his first study on the agency of the interpreter, he became aware in his second study of the importance of the text. Therefore, it was natural for the third step to be a dedicated study dealing with the concept of the text, discussing its various aspects. This third step, in turn, would serve as a prelude to other steps by which the study of other hermeneutical trends in the heritage would be completed scientifically, without neglecting either party to the relationship, nor focusing on one at the expense of the other" (Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nass (A Study in the Sciences of the Quran)*, 2005, p. 6). Thus, the problematic in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's discourse emerges at the ontological levelnamely, the problem of understanding the nature of the text in itselfwhich led to a return to the heritage in search of a concept of the text from a contemporary perspective.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd considers Arab-Islamic civilization to be a civilization of the text, and therefore a civilization of hermeneutics, because a text without interpretation loses its real existence and effectiveness. Interpretation is the other face of the text, from which it derives its movement. It is thus natural that the primary focus should be the Qur'anic text itself, as the "origin of origins" around which all human understanding revolves. It establishes both a religion and a heritage simultaneously. He stated: "The study of heritage should begin at the foundation with the Qur'anic text, as the origin of Islamic culture and its axis" (Harb, 2005, p. 201), which represents the doctrinal basis for the concept.

A text must have multiple interpretations in order to be the axis of a civilization or culture, and this hermeneutical multiplicity is subject to the nature of the discipline dealing with the text. The reason for his emphasis on the concept of the text is linked to culture. As he says: "To uncover the concept of the text is to uncover the mechanisms of knowledge production, given that the religious text has become the generative text for allor mostof the texts preserved in the memory/culture" (Zayd, *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini*, 1994, p. 118). Thus, the broader aim of the study becomes the uncovering of the type of culture to which it belongs, even if only implicitly. He attempts to establish the historicity of the religious text philosophically, religiously, doctrinally, and linguistically.

In presenting this concept, he starts from the linguistic meaning, affirming that the Qur'an is a linguistic text that can be described, within Arab culture, as a central text. In seeking the concept of the text, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is essentially seeking the truth and nature of the Qur'an as a linguistic text. To prove his hermeneutical and analytical perspective, he begins from modern concepts of the text, considering it as a network of relations forming a fabric whose threads can be excavated and deconstructed to obtain deep, metaphysical meanings.

Abu Zayd is always in search of a concept of the text to define the cultural framework of the Arab individual. Therefore, he links the text to language on the one hand, to reality on the other, and to culture on a third. Texts are linguistic structures that do not depart from the semantic system of their language except within specific limits determined by their intended function in culture, through linguistic and social dualities. From this, it can be said that the Qur'anic text is a linguistic text whose meanings are derived by reading it in accordance with the focus of linguistic methodologies.

From the structuralist perspective, the structure of the text is a complete entity open to the totality of space-time, founded on the fusion of the author with the authored, that is, the self with the subject. This is evident in Abu Zayd's interpretation of certain religious texts.

He also considers reality to be the origin of the text: from reality the text was formed, from its language and culture its concepts were shaped, and through its movement in human activity its meanings are renewed. The meaning of the text changes with the changing givens of reality, in the same way that intellectual representation results from the interaction of different genres and cultures. Reality, then, is what directs the understanding of the Qur'anic text.

Moreover, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd believes that the concept of the text has undergone a transformation that has removed it from its truth. He therefore stresses the necessity of returning to the heritage to search for the concept of the Qur'anic text, as well as the importance of openness to the modernity of the "other" and its civilizational achievements. The question about the being of the Qur'anic text, as revealed in Abu Zayd's discourse, is a question of the present in its relationship with the past—a search connected to the past in light of the problems of the present. These are the hypotheses or initial theoretical premises upon which Abu Zayd bases his foundational work at the highest epistemological level of his project.

Criticism as a mechanism for reading the religious text with an objective vision

Epistemic awareness based on a historical sense did not emerge until a later stage. The researcher Miftah al-Jilani states: "I am one of those who deeply believe that the method of caution and skepticism toward everything new, and the complete break with it without any scientific justification merely because it is different, is an unsound method that does not accord with the spirit of our noble Sharia. How many noble verses present the views and arguments of opponents in a manner that even they themselves could not match, then address them scientifically, preserving what is right and correct and discarding what is false and wrong" (al-Jilani, 2006, p. 9).

He sees that the scarcity of serious critical studies, in addition to the prevalence of ideological tendencies in the readings offered by supporters of the modernist trend many of whom label themselves and their views with terms such as "progressive," "liberating," "modernist," and "rationalist," while labeling the religious and their views as "reactionary," "Salafi," "traditionalist," and "fundamentalist" constitutes an incentive for re-reading. Previous studies, although a positive start, "are incomplete unless a dedicated study follows the phenomenon in its historical and epistemological contexts, testing its methodological mechanisms and scientific results, all from within the phenomenon itself and not from outside it" (al-Jilani, 2006, p. 14).

It is clear that this perspective is based on the growth of historical consciousness, which has contributed to shaping a critical awareness of the phenomenon and to noting the gap revealed at the level of ideological readings. It deals with the epistemological phenomenon by tracing it back to the historical and intellectual contexts in which it was formed as both a theory and a method. Hence, these few researchers point to the need to break free from the utilitarian ideological orientation of discourses, which leads to cutting them off from their total context a separation that obscures the historical essence of the phenomenon.

Al-Jilani, in his book *Al-Khitab al-Dini al-Hadathi*, was keen to apply this approach in his study of multiple models of religious modernity, engaging with the texts themselves and exploring their internal logic, that is, linking them to the historical framework in which they arose in order to uncover their real outcomes and objectives. His research addresses the modernist thought of Nasr Abu Zayd as one of many models, yet he does not delve into the epistemological problem of how valid the Western methodological approach is for dealing with the Qur'anic text, or how compatible it is with the nature of that text starting from an understanding of its ontological dimension and reaching the procedural methodological dimension in hermeneutics, which is founded on the ontological dimension.

Similarly, the study by Ahmida al-Nafeer followed the same path, addressing the problem of renewing the interpretive method of the Qur'anic text by recalling its historical evolution through the broader trajectory of the renewal discourse, surveying the contemporary exegetical corpus. This is "not a complete survey, but it remains an approach that seeks to include the largest number of Qur'anic and exegetical studies within a problematic structure

aimed at highlighting the domains of renewal at both the methodological and epistemological levels” (al-Nafeer, 1997, p. 25). The survey work revolves around how to deal with the text both procedurally and theoretically. It points to the relationship between methodological tools and the way we understand the nature of the Qur’anic text, as well as the influence of the philosophical conception of that nature on the nature of interpretive tools. However, it adds nothing new in its treatment of Abu Zayd’s exegetical discourse beyond linking it to the overall epistemological context in which it emerged. It does not explore the reality of the philosophical-epistemological conception of the nature of the Qur’anic text a task that is among the primary objectives of epistemological critical readings since the concept is in fact nothing other than the product of the tools of concept construction and theorizing, which conceal the historicity of the modernist concept lying behind modernist methodological tools in interpretation, bearing in mind that method is a philosophy and theory of knowledge, not merely neutral procedures.

What Abu Zayd ultimately concludes in his critical reading of the discourse of the Arab renaissance and which is a truth that should not be overlooked is that he relied on two important points: first, the Arab-Islamic heritage, which was unified with the essence of Islam and its absolute selfhood; and second, the Western European heritage, which was concentrated in scientific discoveries and their technological fruits. This dual perspective is, on one hand, an absolute veneration, and, on the other, a neglect of the historicity of the Arab heritage as well as of the historicity of Western achievements. It is, therefore, a lack of historical-ontological awareness.

Thus, the problem manifests itself as a conflict between the Arab-Islamic heritage and European civilization, forming a binary opposition. Abu Zayd states: “In our estimation, the opposition between the self and the other, or between Islam and Christian Europe, began to take shape with the discovery of the colonial nature of Europe’s politics in its relationship with the Arab and Islamic world... With the emergence of this opposition came the need for reconciliation, and there began a search within the heritage of the self-Islamic heritage in particular for justifications to accept only what is useful from the intellectual and mental products of the West on one hand, and its social and political products on the other. This reconciliation was the core achievement of the reformist trend represented primarily by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdul” (Zayd, Al-Nass wa al-Sulta wa al-Haqiqah, 2000, p. 28).

These considerations form the implicit principles from which Abu Zayd starts in shaping his epistemological vision of heritage. It begins with the fundamental question that goes beyond the thesis of prevailing religious consciousness to extend toward questioning the reality of the ontological dimension of heritage by re-examining both the concept of heritage and the concept of religion arriving at the semantic distinction between the two terms: religion is the Sharia and way of life in the present, whereas heritage is the way of life in the context of the past. Heritage is nothing more than a historical intellectual human experience linked to the reality of its historical context.

“It is impossible to resolve this complex problem without recognizing the historical depth of heritage on one hand... and recognizing the plurality of this heritage in terms of perspectives and orientations on the other. In other words, it is essential to develop a scientific awareness of heritage that places it in its historical context” (Zayd, Al-Nass wa al-Sulta wa al-Haqiqah, 2000, p. 14). The essence of heritage is thus a historical reality, as a manifestation of the dialectical relationship between human thought and historical reality a concept that constitutes the core of the thinker’s thesis.

The role of western methodologies in the hermeneutic reading of the text

To clarify the difference between hermeneutics in the Islamic heritage which Abu Zayd draws upon—and hermeneutics in its Western form, which Abu Zayd ultimately adopted in his hermeneutic project, it is necessary to link it to the thought of Gadamer and Heidegger. Hermeneutics for Gadamer is based primarily on the foundations previously laid by Heidegger, particularly the idea of human finitude, which Heidegger formulated through the concepts of historicity and the hermeneutics of understanding. This approach does not seek to establish a universal rule valid for all levels of understanding, but rather aims at “forming a critical awareness of the

finitude of Dasein with regard to the ontological possibilities that reveal its specific, concrete situation, while seeking a universal and existential truth that may distort the reality of understanding” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 14).

Gadamer relies on the idea of artistic induction to give a scientific structure to the human sciences, analogous to logical induction in the natural sciences. He states: “The human sciences are tied more to accuracy and the art of self-practice than to applied methods and strict rules” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 10). He sees knowledge in the human sciences as approaching the intuitive faculty of the artist more than the methodological spirit of scientific research.

This is confirmed by Nasr Abu Zayd in his statement: “The difference between a scientific law or scientific truth in the natural sciences and truth in the human sciences is not a difference between science and ideology, but is essentially a difference between empirical truths that can be verified as true or false regardless of place or time, and cultural truth, which is true and correct within the context of a specific human social situation determined by a distinctive historical context” (Zayd, Al-Nass wa al-Sulta wa al-Haqiqa, 2000, p. 54).

Gadamer also holds that listening to heritage in order to reach the truth does not place truth outside the subjectivity of the researcher; rather, it is immanent to his intellectual activity. Thus, for Gadamer, knowledge in the human sciences is always related to self-knowledge. Abu Zayd adopted this idea when speaking about the role of the reader in the creation of meaning.

Moreover, he criticized philosophers who claim an objective interpretation of the text, as Gadamer did, asserting that absolute objectivity is nothing more than an illusion invented by the ideology of Western colonialism. What Abu Zayd drew from Gadamer’s dialectical hermeneutics after modifying it through a materialist dialectical perspective was an original starting point for re-examining our religious heritage, particularly in the interpretation of the Qur’an from its earliest periods to the present.

On the other hand, this allows us to uncover the stance of contemporary trends toward the interpretation of the Qur’anic text and to see the significance of the multiplicity of interpretations. It becomes evident that the hermeneutics Abu Zayd adopted is nothing other than a Western hermeneutic in its evolving stages, especially Gadamer’s dialectical hermeneutics.

The hermeneutic reading of the text in abu zayd’s thought from a critical perspective

Abu Zayd believes that interpretation grants the text life and existence, and that the receiver’s ability is manifested in shaping the text especially when the reader possesses a historically and scientifically informed understanding of religious texts. Without such interpretation, he sees the reader as remaining imprisoned within his old views. He thus affirms: “The most important feature of Arab-Islamic civilization is that it is a civilization of the text, and therefore a civilization of interpretation, because a text without interpretation loses its real existence and effectiveness. Interpretation is the other face of the text, from which it derives its movement” (Zayd, *Maḥmūl al-Naṣṣ (A Study in the Sciences of the Quran)*, 2005, p. 9).

What is addressed here relates to the meaning that Abu Zayd sees as “imposed on texts from the outside through a certain ideology, thus becoming a human and historical meaning that wears a metaphysical garb in order to confer eternity upon it” (Zayd, *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini*, 1994, p. 200). This meaning is tied to reality and its relationship with revelation, which is the idea through which Abu Zayd considered the Qur’an a cultural product. He drew a parallel between the movement and change of reality and the nature and historicity of the text, arguing that if we accept the movement of reality, we must also accept the historicity of the text; and if we reject the historicity of the text, we must reject the movement of reality. Hence his statement: “Reality, then, is the origin and cannot be ignored; from reality the text was formed, from its language and culture its concepts were shaped, and through its movement in human activity its meanings are renewed. Reality first, reality second, and reality last” (Zayd, *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini*, 1994, p. 107). For this reason, the Qur’anic text is called the Qur’anic phenomenon, generated primarily from history yet continually reproducing meanings upon which the Islamic phenomenon itself was built.

The reading of the religious intellectual heritage returns to the core of his intellectual project, as seen in his book *Al-Nass wa al-Sultawa al-Haqiqa*, which centers on “an analytical and deconstructive reading of the religious

intellectual heritage of Arab-Islamic culture” (Zayd, Al-Nass wa al-Sulta wa al-Haqiqa, 2000, p. 7). This is also embodied in his critical reading of contemporary religious thought, starting from the same fundamental problem: the problem of method in understanding the religious text. At the same time, it represents a linking of ancient and contemporary religious discourse. He writes: “Since this religious intellectual heritage derives its primary and original reference from the Islamic religious text, and is thus considered a reading of it, the problems of reading and interpreting the religious text are foundational to many of the problems of reading religious thought posed by the heritage itself, in addition to the problems of this heritage and its interpretation” (Zayd, Al-Nass wa al-Sulta wa al-Haqiqa, 2000, p. 7).

Thus, interpreting heritage texts is a product of the human mind in its understanding; understanding and interpretation are products of human thought, which in turn is deeply connected to historical reality. From this perspective, the relationship between thought and reality forms a central problem in his critical reading, as illustrated in his work *Al-Ittijah al-‘Aqli fi al-Tafsir*. This work required the use of the historical-social analysis method, considering ideas as the result of the dialectical relationship between the movement of reality and the stance of a given thinker toward that reality.

From here, we see that this reading revealed the role of the interpreterthe interpreting subjectin the process of producing and shaping religious meaning. The interpreting subject, in this view, is a human being connected to the text on one hand and bound to it in a dialectical relationship on the other. Interpretation thus becomes the product of the dialectical relationship between the epistemological horizon of the interpreter and the Qur’anic text.

The central focal point upon which Abu Zayd’s discourse on religious thought is based is the problem of method that is, the search for a method in understanding and interpreting the Qur’anic text. He confirms this in his article *Masarat al-Bahth ‘an al-Manhajmin al-Bidayatila Tahlil al-Khitab*. Any attempt to approach the problem of understanding the religious text in Abu Zayd’s thought must therefore be made in light of the profound transformations in the intellectual trajectory of this discourse and its epistemological movement.

The experience of religious thought in Abu Zayd’s work is essentially a series of successive transformations in the movement of thought. As he states in the introduction to his first major study, which theorized a hermeneutical method: “This study represents the third step on the path of studying our intellectual heritage from the perspective of the relationship between the interpreter and the text and his dialectic with it. The two previous steps were studies of the interpretation of the Qur’anic text, whether this interpretation was carried out on rational grounds, as with the Mu‘tazila, or on intuitive, experiential grounds, as with the Sufis. In both earlier studies, the focus was on the intellectual and epistemological horizons from which interpretation began. It was therefore necessary to focus on the text itself in an attempt to discover its components, its specific mechanisms, and its positive role in the process of interpretation” (Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nass (A Study in the Sciences of the Quran)*, 2005, pp. 5-6).

Criticisms

Like other modernist researchers, Abu Zayd was subjected to many criticisms, most of which centered on his hermeneutic reading of the text. Among these critics is Ali Harb, who holds that “Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’s view does not differ from that of the fundamentalists in his reading of the Qur’anic text, because he retained the same metaphysical, transcendental language of the fundamentalists, while his intellectual project is based on calling for liberation from it” (Harb, 2005, p. 210).

Accordingly, Harb argues that Abu Zayd’s subjectivity is entirely absent, as he continued in the same approach of searching for and generating procedural concepts in explanation and interpretation—such as hermeneutics, abrogation, and reasons for revelation. Harb further believes that “the linguistic reading is too narrow to grasp the meanings of this text” (Harb, 2005, p. 207), since Abu Zayd offered only the linguistic method as the sole tool for understanding the Qur’anic text. This, in Harb’s view, deprived the text of many other dimensions from which it could be read—through philosophical, mystical, or jurisprudential methods.

Harb emphasizes that “the Qur’anic text should be read from multiple perspectives, and all available epistemological discoveries should be embraced” (Harb, 2005, p. 208). Consequently, Abu Zayd’s reading lacked

the spiritual and semantic significance that distinguishes the religious text from the literary one. Moreover, the historical method on which Abu Zayd based most of his ideas is itself a product of Western ideology.

It can also be said that Abu Zayd's reading of the Qur'anic text is an ordinary one, similar to the epistemological reading of Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, as well as the Marxist readings of Tayyib Tizini and Hussein Mroueh, which likewise failed to reach the "unthought" spaces within Arab culture.

Conclusion

The intellectual project presented by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd for reading the Qur'anic text holds significant value, as it opens the way for renewed research and exploration into the methods of criticism and interpretation of religion in general, not only Islam. Abu Zayd succeeded in deconstructing the text and uncovering the relative, the worldly, and the historical behind the divine absolute, as well as in analyzing how the religious element is formed. He also sought to penetrate the thresholds of the sacred.

The novelty brought by this study lies in its reconsideration of the concept of revelation and its method of producing meaning, in analyzing the levels of the text, and in uncovering the mechanisms of its formation and consolidation.

Conflict of interest

Author declare that there is no any conflict of interest.

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