

The Idea of Context and Contextual Qur'anic Interpretation

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Abstract

In the domain of Qur'anic interpretation, there has been significantly less emphasis on contextualization in contrast to literalism and textualism concerning both classical and modern periods. Given the differences between the contexts of the time of Qur'anic revelation and those of the modern world (i.e., social, economic, cultural contexts etc.), several Muslim scholars have recognized the need of reinterpretation of specific Qur'anic texts throughout the modern period. Towards this ,the main focus of this library-based research is to explore the contextual interpretation of the holy Qur'an to study how this approach can enable the Muslims of the contemporary era to follow its ethical teachings according to their contexts. The research shows that the contextual approach to Qur'anic interpretation aims at understanding the real implication of Qur'anic message by contextualizing certain ideas and concepts of the holy Qur'an. The contextual approach to Qur'anic interpretation does not modify the fundamental Qur'anic values, beliefs or practices but it makes a room for the interpreter to consider the changing situations and contexts.

Keywords: Qur'anic interpretation, Contextual Approach, Context.

1. Introduction

The holy Qur'ān is a source of guidance and a perfect clarification for all human beings, and it is believed by its followers (i.e., the Muslims) that this book is completely of divine origin. Since it is the last revealed book, therefore its message should be relevant and applicable to every age and time. The method of interpreting a verse of the holy Qur'ān by considering its historical context is not an entirely new concept. The medieval exegetes also paid attention towards the occasions of revelation i.e., *asbāb al-nuzūl* و while realizing the fact that the revelation of the holy Qur'ān took place in response to a specific situation. The Qur'ānic verses were further linked to specific historical contexts by exploring them in the light of hadith and the biography of the holy Prophet *صلى الله عليه وسلم*. Today, several scholars advocate the idea of understanding the occasions of revelation to develop an understanding of the true meaning of each verse and to distinguish universal principles from the specific instructions.¹

The Qur'ānic words are open to several different interpretations. Let's take an example of the word present in the holy Qur'ān: *Al-Qitāl*. The meaning of this word can be taken as "to kill in a battle" and it can also imply the meaning of "to eliminate other lives" or it can also mean "curse".²

This explains that a word can be interpreted differently depending on the context and on the ability or tendency of an interpreter. The interpreter considers the ability of his/her audience while he is interpreting some text. While considering all the prospects, an interpreter comes to the meaning that is most appropriate among the different possible and applicable meanings.

The process of understanding the holy Qur'ān is strongly related to text and context and several efforts have been made in this regard in the course of Muslim history. The development of Qur'ānic commentaries produced a variety of approaches to interpret and perceive the Qur'ānic message. There is a class of Muslims who understand the holy Qur'ān by following a textual approach while some others interpret it contextually. The verses of the holy Qur'ān should be

¹ Rachel M Scott, "A Contextual Approach to Women's Rights in the Qur'an: Readings of 4: 34," *The Muslim World* 99, no. 1 (2009): 60.

² Dede Rodin, "Islam Dan Radikalisme: Telaah atas Ayat-ayat "Kekerasan" dalam al-Qur'an," *Addin* 10, no. 1 (2016): 29-60.

understood from every perspective since any mistake in the interpretation of verses might lead to misinterpretation of the message of the holy Qur'ān.³

1.1 Defining Context

Originally, the word 'context' is a noun having at least the following two meanings in the dictionary:

- 1) A part of a description or phrase that brings clarity to the meaning.
- 2) A situation that is related to a particular incident.⁴

Therefore, 'context' refers to the situation in which something happens that helps in understanding the situation. 'Contextual' is an adjective, which refers to something that is connected to a particular context⁵ and contextualize is a verb which means considering something in relation to the situation in which it occurs or exists.⁶

Technically, 'context' can be defined as the physical environment in which a word can be used⁷ both in a narrow or broad sense. In the former case, context refers to the knowledge about the factors that lie outside the text under consideration. While in the latter case, context can be used to denote the knowledge of those factors that are part of text as well as other textual parts under consideration.⁸

The 'Contextualists' are those Muslim scholars who hold the belief that there are certain teachings of the holy Qur'ān that are contextual in nature and therefore they should be interpreted according to the context surrounding it. They view the holy Qur'ān as a practical source of guidance whose

³ Ahmad Syukri Saleh, "An Understanding of some Interpretations of The Qur'an by Textual and Contextual Approaches" (paper presented at the International Conference on Qur'an and Hadith Studies (ICQHS 2017), 2017:333.

⁴ A Nadjib, "Contextual Qur'an Interpretation: The Study on the Concept of "Hierarchy of Values" Abdullah Saeed," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture* 4 (2016): 91-92.

⁵ www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/contextual?q=Contextual

⁶ www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/contextualize

⁷ George Yule, "Pragmatics. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press," (2000): 128.

⁸ Guy Cook, *Discourse and literature: The interplay of form and mind* (Oxford University Press Oxford, (1994):24.

interpretation should always be based on the present situation and circumstances and should not be treated as a rigid set of rules.⁹

The idea behind the contextual approach to Qur'ānic interpretation is to acquire an understanding of Qur'ānic message that remains relevant in all space, time, and conditions. The concept behind the idea of contextualization is that a particular interpretation of a verse might be appropriate in one context but may require re-interpretation in some other context. According to Fazlur Rahman, the problems continue to emerge in the process of societal development therefore there is a need to understand the limited text in the context of unlimited reality.¹⁰

2. Modern and Traditional understanding of the Religious Teachings

The teachings of Islam can be grouped into four categories as illustrated in Figure 1: The first group of Islamic teachings relates to the matters of faith and belief i.e., faith in Allah عزوجل, faith in the seal of the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and his mission, and faith in the Day of Judgment and the life after death. The second group of Islamic teachings include the matters of morality which is among the most important aims of the prophetic mission. The third group of Islamic teachings belong to matters related to worship and religious rituals including prayer, fasting, hajj and alms. The fourth and last category of Islamic teachings belongs to the non-worship aspect of Shari'ah which is known as 'Fīqh' and includes the laws relating to economics, fundamental laws, public as well as private international laws, penal laws and laws relating to other precepts relating to social and moral life.¹¹

⁹ Nadjib, "Contextual Qur'an Interpretation: The Study on the Concept of "Hierarchy of Values" Abdullah Saeed," 91-92.

¹⁰ Muhammad Yusuf, Nahdhiyah Nahdhiyah, and Anwar Sadat, "Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement and It's Contribution to the Development of Religious Moderation," *IJISH* (2021): 53.

¹¹ Mohsen Kadivar, "Human rights and intellectual Islam," in *New Directions in Islamic Thought : Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*, ed. Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009):47-74.

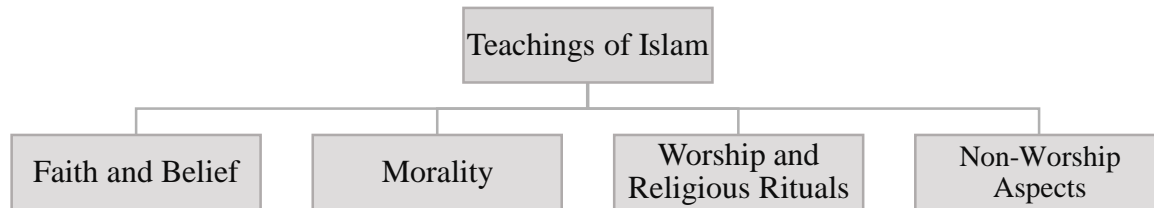


Figure 1 : Categories of Islamic Teachings

The first three categories of Islamic teachings comprise of more than 98 percent of the verses of the holy Qur’ān and only 2 percent of the verses are related to *fiqh* of social transactions. These matters related to *fiqh* of social transactions has gained so much importance in traditional Islam that they overshadowed other three parts of Islamic teachings i.e., faith, morality, and worship. Furthermore, the *fiqh* related aspect of teachings have also overshadowed other worship-related aspects of Islamic teachings.

The modern and traditional understandings of the religious teachings of Islam mainly differ in the fourth part i.e., *fiqh* of social transactions. Although modernists do not deny the need for Islamic law, but they disagree with the stance adopted by the traditional scholars on certain percepts. This gave rise to the development of a new *fiqh* in the modern times. This *fiqh* has many aspects in common with the traditional *fiqh* but there is somewhat different style adopted by modern scholars in some other respects like the matters related to human rights. If the overall volume is considered, the new *fiqh* is smaller than the traditional one and its principles are different from those adopted by traditional scholars.¹²

3. Early trends in Qur’ānic Exegesis

Though the holy Qur’ān was revealed in Arabic that was the native language of its first recipients, they need to seek its interpretation to comprehend its directives completely and to act accordingly. After the death of the holy prophet *صلى الله عليه وسلم* and growth of the Islamic empire, there were several diverse cultures and languages that became part of the Arabic culture and resulted in

¹² Ibid 47-74

divergence of religious, theological, and political ambience. Furthermore, the Arabic language continued to evolve and this required the need to contextualize the meanings of words to understand the Qur'ānic message in its real essence.¹³ In order to contextualize the meaning of Qur'ānic words, it is necessary to understand the structure and formation of the words. Primarily, the holy Qur'ān comprise of two types of verses: 'Muhkam' and 'Mutashab' ¹⁴ . Muhkam are the words having clear meaning and they do not require any further interpretation or explanation. Mutashabih are those verses that require further interpretation as they carry two meanings or there may be a few different possible meanings depending on the context. They can also be considered as ambiguous which implies that the verse may not have an obvious relation to any event, object or phenomenon or may not contain any metaphor.¹⁵

In the Classical era, the Qur'ānic exegesis can be broadly categorized into two major trends i.e., tafsīr bi'l-Ma'thur and tafsīr bil-ra'y¹⁶. One of the prophetic mission was to explain the message and meaning of Qur'ānic verses through practicing them and explaining them in his own words.¹⁷ After the death of the holy prophet *صلى الله عليه وسلم*, the first four caliphs (663-660 CE) and a number of companions contributed significantly in explaining and making the message of Qur'ānic text understandable for the audience. Among these companions, there were Abd Allah b. Mas'ud Ubay b.Ka'b, Abd Allah b. Abbas and Zayd b. Thabit and many other companions were included in this endeavor.¹⁸ It was 150 years after the death of holy prophet *صلى الله عليه وسلم* that scholars began compilation of tafasīr based on prophetic traditions and narrations. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, scholars prepared several tafasīr that reflected various trends in Islamic thought. The different trends in tafsīr led to the development of several different genres in the tafsīr studies. These include sectarian, theological, legal, mystical, and philosophical trends in tafsīr studies.¹⁹

¹³ Recep Dogan, *Usul al Tafsir: The Sciences and Methodology of the Qur'an* (Tughra Books, 2014): 121.

¹⁴ Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum al Qur'an: an introduction to the sciences of the Qur'an (Koran)* (Kube Publishing Ltd, 2015):58-60,63.

¹⁵ Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an* (Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999):21-31.

¹⁶ Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An introduction* (Routledge, 2008):178.

¹⁷ Hakan Coruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'anic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 1 (2017): 85-104.

¹⁸ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān : towards a contemporary approach* (Abingdon England ; New York: Routledge, 2006):9.

¹⁹ Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an : An introduction* (New York, NY: Routhledge, 2008):15.

4. Modern Trends in Qur'ānic Exegesis

There are ongoing debates about the methods to approach the meaning of the holy Qur'ān in contemporary era which are complex and often controversial. To maintain a balance between traditional living style and modern conditions, there is need to change the way to approach and interpret the Qur'ānic text. Based on these ways, Muslims can be broadly categorized into three main groups: 'Textualists', 'Semi-Textualists' and 'Contextualists' as given below.

Muslim Categories

Textualists: Literal interpretation of Qur'ānic text

Semi-Textualists: Apologetic discourse

Contextualists: Qur'ānic re-interpretation in modern context

Textualist argue for a 'literal' interpretation of Qur'ānic text and hold the view that the meaning of Qur'ān as perceived 1400 years ago is still applicable in the modern times and its interpretation cannot be changed according to the changing circumstances. Semi-textualists follow an apologetic discourse and are in some way different from the textualists based on their style of giving due importance to the changing needs and demands of modern times while interpreting the Qur'ānic texts.²⁰ The third category is for 'Contextualists'. These are the Muslim scholars who believe that there are certain teachings of the holy Qur'ān that require re-interpretation in the modern context to make the meaning of the Qur'ānic message understandable in the changing contexts.

²⁰ Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān : towards a contemporary approach*, 116-25.

5. Recognition of Socio-Historical Context in Qur'ānic Interpretation

The socio-cultural life of Hijaz was under the influence of different Mediterranean cultures which includes the influence of Jews and Christians and South Arab, Ethiopia and Egypt and due to these facts, it was very diverse. Therefore, the people living in Hijaz had norms and values that were depicted in their cultural and material world and it involved a range of different physical characteristics, events, behaviors and institutions.²¹

To interpret the Qur'ānic verses by exploring their socio-historical context, it is very important to develop understanding of the social, political, economic and legal climate of the Arabian region and also of the associated norms, laws and values of the Arabs. The holy Qur'ān has often referred to this aspect. Historically, the interpretation of the text focused mainly on the non-linguistic and historical factors and does not pay attention to the socio-historical context. By understanding the verses in their anthropological and socio-historical context makes the verses comprehensible.²²

In relation to understanding the Qur'ānic text through a contextual approach, contextualists acknowledge both narrow and broad contexts.²³ In former case, the contextualist aim to refer to the words and sentences that surround an idea given in the holy Qur'ān and they state that to understand a particular Qur'ānic implication they should consider it by relating it to some other verses that correspond to similar case or situation. Whereas the broad meaning of context refers to two things: First, the socio-historic context at the time of Qur'ānic revelation and second, the context in which a particular Qur'ānic verse is being interpreted.²⁴

The contemplation of the holy Qur'ān should determine the specific context in which those verses were revealed and then link it to the current scenario for making them understandable as well as applicable to the people today. The interpretation of Qur'ānic texts does not refer to just understand them literally and grammatically but the interpreter should look at the meaning of the verses in the broader context while considering the present scenario and current significant issues.²⁵ The most

²¹ Abdul-Kader A. Shareef G. R. Hawting, "Approaches to the Quran," (1993): viii.

²² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & modernity : transformation of an intellectual tradition*, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1982):3-10.

²³ Saeed, A. (2006). *Interpreting the Qur'ān : towards a contemporary approach*. Routledge,116-125.

²⁴ Abdullah Saeed, "Some reflections on the contextualist approach to ethico-legal texts of the Quran," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71, no. 2 (2008): 221-37.

²⁵ Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Theological approaches to Qur'anic exegesis: A practical comparative-contrastive analysis* (Routledge, 2012):3.

significant issue which the interpreters are facing in the contemporary times deals with the mutability and immutability of Qur'ānic text i.e., whether the meaning of a particular verse is fixed, or it can be altered in changing circumstances.

6. Adaptation of Ethical-Legal Content of the Qur'ān

The word “**ethics**” has a Greek origin that originates from “ethos” which denotes the character, spirit or attitude of a group of people or culture.²⁶ The word ‘ethics’ is referred as a system of moral principles which form the basis for the classification of human actions as good or bad and right or wrong.²⁷ The term ‘legal’ is an adjective and it can be defined as something which is connected with the law.²⁸

Ethical and legal Qur'ānic texts are intended to guide the Muslims for leading a moral life. These texts address matters related to ritual worships and also relates to worldly issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. The ethical and legal teachings of the holy Qur'ān can be grouped into five categories: Obligatory, Prohibited, Recommended, Reprehensible and permissible. According to Islamic law, the entire range of human actions lie in either of these categories. For instance, offering five daily prayers is obligatory for every Muslim while performing additional prayers is recommended. Another example is stealing which is prohibited in Islam. Islam considers greediness and jealousy in the category of reprehensible. These all categories can be applied only to adult Muslims of sound mind.

These texts have been studied by Muslim scholars over centuries to determine their effects on the life of Muslims and to categorize their actions according to certain criteria. Based on these studies, the four schools of thoughts developed under the name of their founding scholars: Malik ibn Anas (d.179 AH /795 AD), Abu Hanifa (d.150 AH/767 AD), Al-Shafi'i (d.204 AH /820 AD) and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.241 AH/ 855 AD). Today the ethical and legal teachings of Qur'ān have been implied by the Muslims in a greater and lesser extent to understand and analyze the relevance of Qur'ānic teachings to the lives of Muslims today.²⁹

²⁶ Stephen E Loeb, "A survey of ethical behavior in the accounting profession," *Journal of Accounting Research* (1971): 287-306.

²⁷ www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-philosophy

²⁸ www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/legal

²⁹ Saeed, "Some reflections on the contextualist approach to ethico-legal texts of the Quran," 221-37.

The contextualization of Qur'ānic interpretation requires a sociological analysis that investigates the social, economic, political, and professional domains along with the examination of existing traditions to develop a clear picture for guiding the people towards the right path. This process demands comprehensive explanation and clear instruments. All these endeavors were applied by the prominent Muslim scholars to develop a contextual understanding of the Qur'ānic text.³⁰

The focus of contextual approach to Qur'ānic interpretation is on the ethical core of the holy Qur'ān. The contextual scholars have made remarkable contributions in the field of Qur'ānic interpretation in recent years. They have shed light on several sensitive contemporary issues such as gender equality and social justice and have come up with significant ideas and interpretations in relevance to the changing circumstances in the lives of contemporary Muslims.³¹

7. Contextual Interpretation in Practice

The contextual approach to Qur'ānic interpretation provides an interplay between reason and revelation. To interpret the Qur'ānic text and to understand its message clearly, contextualists give due importance to the historic-context i.e., the conditions under which a particular verse was revealed while also considering the present socio-historic context.³²

The objective underlying the contextual approach is not to change the meaning of the text but to explore the main content i.e., ethical, and legal by understanding the historical context in order to get the true meaning of the text. To apply a contextual approach to Qur'ānic interpretation, an interpreter should consider the following two points:

1. To understand the internal, external and linguistic aspects of the holy Qur'ān.³³
2. To interpret the holy Qur'ān in the light of views of holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, his companions and their successors as recommended by the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم

Furthermore, the interpreter is also advised to refer to the views of renowned religious scholars. Finally, he/she should also gather information from his/her context and should combine all the

³⁰ Dede Rosyada, "A Contextual Method of Interpreting The Qur'an: A Search for The Compatibility of Islam and Modernity" (paper presented at the International Conference on Qur'an and Hadith Studies (ICQHS 2017), 2017):4.

³¹ Saeed, "Some reflections on the contextualist approach to ethico-legal texts of the Quran," 221-37.

³² M Fauzan Zenrif, "Sintesis paradigma studi al-Quran," (UIN-Maliki Press, 2008):53.

³³ Fadlan Mohd Othman et al., "Interpretation methodology of al shaykh'abd al-rahman al sa'di in his taysir al-karim al rahman fi tafsir kalam al-mannan," *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences* 5, no. 5 (2011): 422-31.

gathered information to understand the Qur'ānic message in strong relevance to the present time and provide its implications for the future time.

The objective meaning of Qur'ānic text can be understood by placing the text within its own context. However, a critical factor to consider for this is that today Muslims live in different circumstances than those at the time of revelation. Thus, taking this into consideration, certain Qur'ānic texts specifically those related to legal matters should be interpreted differently.³⁴

It is worth mentioning that the rise of Islam did not dramatically change the civil and social situation prevalent since the pre-Islamic era. The Muslim community mostly lived in a Bedouin context and most of the laws developed in the social context of Bedouin era were simply incorporated into the new legal system brought by Islam.³⁵

There are verses that are interpreted differently due to difference in ideology or pre-understanding of the interpreter. But these differences do not mean conflicts rather these are difference in opinions. Some points are not mentioned by some scholars while some others go in deep details and there appears some difference in their interpretations. Therefore, these differences must be addressed wisely so that they result in unity and do not become the source of further conflicts.

8. Modern Concerns about Relevance of Contextual Approach

Throughout the modern period, several scholars have highlighted the need for reinterpretation of specific Qur'ānic texts due to the difference in the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts of today and the context at the time of Qur'ānic revelation.³⁶

The contemporary interpretation methods are those in which the thinkers apply the rules that were not outlined by previous commentators and this interpretation method evolves in modern times.³⁷ Some of the prominent contemporary interpretation methods include those of '*textualist*', '*contextualist*', and '*thematic*', '*modernist*', '*feminist*' and '*socio-political*' approaches. Several

³⁴ Rotraud Wielandt, "Main trends of Islamic theological thought from the late nineteenth century to present times," *The Oxford handbook of Islamic theology* (2015): 740.

³⁵ Abdelmadjid Charfi, *Islam: between message and history* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 65-66.

³⁶ Abdullah Saeed and Ali Akbar, "Contextualist Approaches and the Interpretation of the Qur'ān," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 527.

³⁷ Nur Zainatul Nadra Zainol, Latifah Abdul Majid, and Mohd Faizulamri Md Saad, "An overview on hermeneutics method application to the Quran by Muslim thinkers," *International Journal of Engineering and Technology* 7, no. 4.9 (2018): 167-70.

modern Muslim scholars who were familiar with western philosophical and hermeneutical approaches diverted from traditional exegetical approaches and employed modern hermeneutical methods to Qur'ānic interpretation for understanding the Qur'ānic message in the modern relevance.³⁸

The question arises whether the contemporary methods of Qur'ānic interpretation has something new to offer. Scholars such as Rotraud Wielandt hold the view that hermeneutical approaches have not added something substantially new to already available interpretations. Johanna Pink also agrees with the similar view and says that tafsīr is a very traditional genre and relies mostly on prophetic hadith and on the works of earlier exegetes.³⁹ Both Wielandt and Pink regard the presence of any new trends in contemporary tafsīr trends as exceptions.

The modern socio-cultural and religious environment requires a contextualized interpretation of Qur'ānic message. An interpretation method can be regarded as modern only if its explanation addresses the cultural, social, and political issues of the present era.⁴⁰

9. Conclusion

There has been tremendous development in the field of tafsīr studies in the twentieth century. The tafsīr works became more influential because of the socio-economic changes that took place throughout the Islamic world. The establishment of printing houses played a constructive role in creating more awareness among the people about Islam. The tafsīr played a role of a bridge between the scholarly group and the public. At the turn of twentieth century, a tremendous amount of tafsīr works was done from Egypt to Turkey to India to Indonesia. In order to solve the contemporary problems, the holy Qur'ān should be of prime concern for the Muslim scholars, and they should adopt the approach that is more appropriate for interpreting the Qur'ānic text. The recent developments in the contemporary era require a broad interpretation of the message of the Qur'ānic text to understand its relevance and applicability in the changing scenarios. Several different approaches have been developed to understand the Qur'ānic text. The two main approaches followed for the interpretation of Qur'ānic text are '*textual*' and '*contextual*'. Both

³⁸ Ibid 167-170

³⁹ Johanna Pink, "Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunnī tafsīr: Towards a Typology of Qur'an Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia and Turkey," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (2010): 56-82.

⁴⁰ Sirry Mun'im A, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2014): 1-36.

approaches have their own pros and cons and are applied to the interpretation process under certain conditions. The best way to understand the Qur'ānic text is to apply a combination of textual and contextual approaches. This article explores the concerns and needs that justify the application of contextual approach to Qur'ānic interpretation by highlighting the importance of socio-historic context to understand the universality or specificity of the Qur'ānic message in different contexts.

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