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Reinterpreting The Quran

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Calls for the reinterpretation of the Quran are being heard in the media, as a counter to Muslim extremists who justify their violence and extremism by the Quran. An example cited is the assertion that the 72 "hur," promised to the martyr, means grapes and not virgins since, in Aramaic, "hur" means white and is used for white grapes.

This interpretation is not intellectually honest as it does not stand on any firm historical, linguistic or religious ground. It seems more like an attack on the Quran and an effort to distort its meanings and make it sound ridiculous.

Geert Wilders, on the other extreme, tried to prove that the Quran preaches violence toward non-Muslims. He misquoted and mistranslated the Quran and suppressed the contexts. His agenda was exposed.

Between these two lies the balance. Violence and extremism cannot be countered by absurdities but by genuine scholarship that promotes moderation.

The Quran is not a book that can be interpreted according to one's whims and fancies. Quranic exegesis is based on clear principles. Let me cite two of these principles that are relevant to the hur-to-grape yarn.

First, the Quran explains itself. This is one of its unique features. Its discussion on most topics is not confined to a single chapter but extends over several. In order to fully understand its teachings concerning any issue, Islamic scholars will study all the relevant verses.

Take the topic of the hur, mentioned in four separate chapters. Nowhere is the number 72 mentioned nor does it promise hur to martyrs but to all righteous people who enter Paradise. True, martyrs are promised hur in the Hadith – sayings of Muhammad –but that's another discussion.

In two of the four places where hur is mentioned, the Quran says that God will give them in marriage to the righteous (44:54 and 52:20). Marriage to grapes?

A third chapter describes the hur as "confined to pavilions" (55:72) and "whom no man or jinni has touched before" (55:74), while a fourth says they have "beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes" (56:22) and that God "created them a special creation, and made them virgin, beloved (by nature), equal in age" (56:35-37).

What linguistic contortion and intellectual jugglery can claim that hur means grapes!

Lest someone should think that these verses paint a picture of sensuality in the Islamic Paradise, let me hasten to say that they rather speak of marriage, lowering of the gaze, decency, faithfulness and above all, nearness to God.

A second principle is that the words of the Quran will have the meanings as they were spoken and understood by the Arabs of that time. New meanings may be assigned to words over time but they cannot be used to interpret the Quran. Would you use the modern meaning of a word to interpret a

passage from Shakespeare or Chaucer or would you seek to understand how the word was understood in those days? Similarly, the original meanings of the Arabic words must derive from how the language was used at the time of revelation.

This principle also means that the meaning cannot be taken from another language. Rather, it must come from the usage of native Arabic speakers. Languages share words, but not always with the same meanings. The French word *marcher* and the English *march* may have the same root, but do they have the same meaning? No. Similarly, to say that the Arabic *hur* means the same as the Aramaic *hur*, i.e. white grapes, is simply a wild assertion without proof from the Arabic usage.

Not only was the Quran preserved in its original language, but it was the will of God that the Arabic language itself should be preserved. Much of the Arabic poetry before Islam is still with us today and remains a resource to verify the meaning of any word.

Furthermore, when Islam spread, the memorization, study and practice of the Quran also spread. So a lot of attention was paid to its meanings. This has been documented in the linguistic discussions found in many of the books of Tafseer (Quranic exegesis).

Let it be clear that the Quran does not promote extremism or terrorism, contrary to the claims of Geert Wilders. The mission of the Quran is to promote uprightness. "Surely this Quran guides to that which is most upright and gives good news to the believers who do good that they shall have a great reward." (Quran, 17:09)

"Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition." (Quran, Chap 16, V. 90)

This was the mission of the Prophet himself. In his own words: "I was sent to perfect the best character traits."
