

A Syntactic, Semantic, and Intertextual Analysis of the Qur'anic Ayah 'Abasa wa-Tawalla and the Pitfalls in Its Translations

Abdulameer Hussein Ali

Department of English, Al Qalam University

Alkhzlybdalamyr57@gmail.com

المستخلص

الكلمات المفتاحية: الآية المتشابه المحكم

تمثل اية عيس وتولى إحدى المسائل

التناص عيس التجاور

التي كانت وما تزال موضع جدل محتدم بين علماء المسلمين. ويتمثل هذا الجدل بشأن المعني بالفعلين عيس وتولى في الآية المباركة؛ فبينما يذهب فريق منهم إلى أن المعني بهما هو النبي محمد (ص) ، يذهب الفريق الآخر إلى أنه شخص آخر كان جالساً معه ؛ ولكل فريق بالطبع حجته التي يحتج بها. وهنا يبرز الهدف من هذا البحث ألا وهو أثبات ما إذا كان المعني بهذين الفعلين هو شخص الرسول (ص) أم إنه شخص آخر كان جالساً معه. ومن أجل الوصول لهذا الهدف تم تبني منهجية تتضمن ثلاث عناصر: التحليل النحوي والتحليل الدلالي للآية بالإضافة الى التناص . لقد أثبتت الدراسة من خلال هذه المنهجية وبالأخص من خلال مكوناتها الثاني والثالث أعني: التحليل الدلالي والتناص (كونهما يحسمان الجدل بشكل قاطع) الى أن المعني بهذين الفعلين لم يكن النبي محمد (ص) بل أحد الجالسين معه. كما وأثبتت الدراسة كيف أن المترجمين في ترجماتهم لمعاني القران قد أغفلوا هذا الأمر؛ وذلك باستخدامهم كلمة (the prophet) أي النبي (ص) أو الضمير (he) في إشارة اليه باعتبارها الفاعل لهذين الفعلين بالرغم من أن الآية لا تتحدث بشكل واضح

Abstract

The Qur'anic ayah “*abasa wa-tawalla*” (frowned and turned away), is one of the moot points upon which Muslim scholars disputed over until now; their dispute revolves around the one actually intended by the two verbs in the ayah viz. Prophet Muhammad or someone present in his assembly. While one team directly assigns the two verbs to the Prophet, the other assigns them to the one in his assembly. Each team, of course, has its evidence that supports its argument. This study is then an attempt to settle this argument. To achieve this, a three-component methodology has been adopted, which includes analyzing the ayah in question syntactically, semantically, and intertextually. By virtue of this methodology—particularly through the latter two components—it has been found out that the individual intended in the ayah is not the Prophet, but rather someone who was present in his assembly. It has also been found out that there is a recurring pitfall in the translations of the ayah ,that is, the translators of the Holy Qur’an whether—directly or indirectly— tend to assign the two verbs to the Prophet as evidenced by a survey of eight selected

translations, even though the ayah itself neither explicitly states nor clearly indicates this.

Key words: ayah allegorical fundamental intertextuality frown juxtapose

1.Introduction

The ayahs of the Holy Quran are divided into either *fundamental* (محكمات) i.e., those with an established or basic meaning, or *allegorical* (متشابهات) i.e., those with more than one meaning (Ali, 1989, p.123), as evident in example (1) below:

(1) He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. (Qur'an 3 :7)

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ. (ال عمران: ٧)

Fundamental ayahs do not cause any dispute or disagreement amongst Muslim scholars because they usually include determined matters such as *command* (الامر), *forbidden* (النهي), *lawful* (حلال), and *unlawful* (حرام). The problem, however, arises with allegorical ayahs i.e., those with more than one interpretation and thus being ambiguous (Al-Zarkashi,1957, pp. ١١٢-١٥٥) & (Al-Qurtubi,2006, p.18). The following ayah is a typical example of

fundamental ayahs owing to its clarity of meaning, that is, trade is permitted, while usury is forbidden:

(2) But God hath permitted trade and forbidden usury (Qur'an 2: 275)

البقرة: ٢٧٥) وَأَحَلَّ اللَّهُ الْبَيْعَ وَحَرَّمَ الرِّبَا. (

Let's, however, consider the following ayah:

(3) O ye who believe, when you prepare for prayer, wash your faces and your hands (and arms) to the elbows; rub your heads (with water) and (wash) your feet to the ankles (Qur'an 5 :6).

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ فَاغْسِلُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى الْمَرَافِقِ وَامْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ إِلَى الْمَأْتَلِ. (المائدة: ٦)

The ayah in (3) is very clear in its opening, as it commands the washing of the face and hands. The problem, however, arises with the word *feet* over which Muslim scholars have significantly differed. This disagreement is evident in the translation of the ayah, where the second occurrence of the verb wash is placed in parentheses. This suggests that the feet can either be washed or rubbed.

Those who support the view that the feet must be washed include Al-Qurtubī (2006, p. 343) and As-Suyūfī (2004, p. 134), who consider the word feet

to be grammatically linked to the noun phrase hands, which are washed. On the other hand, those who advocate rubbing the feet consider it to be linked to the noun phrase heads, which are rubbed. This latter group defends its position by arguing that the word feet in the ayah is closer in proximity to the word heads (which are rubbed) than to hands (which are washed) (Al-Shīrāzī, 2005, p. 613.).

This dispute over whether to wash or rub the feet has rendered the ayah somewhat allegorical.

From the point of view of transformational grammar, the ayah in (3) is deemed *ambiguous* because it is having more than one interpretation. However, these two interpretations of the ayah are not caused by the lexical meaning of the NP *feet*, but by its structural or grammatical position i.e., whether it is linked to the word *hands* or to the word *heads*. Such ambiguity which is caused by the structure of the sentence is called *structural ambiguity* i.e., one caused by the structure of the sentence rather than by the lexical meaning of any of the words used in it (see section ٤ below).

By the same token, Muslim scholars have differed regarding who is meant by the verbs *'abasa wa-tawallā* (“he

frowned and turned away”) in the ayah in question. Some scholars directly attribute these actions to the Prophet (pbuh), while others believe they refer to someone else who was present in his assembly.

Syntactically speaking, the first group holds that the elliptical subject of the two verbs refers to the noun phrase the Prophet, even though it is not explicitly mentioned. In contrast, the second group believes that the omitted subject refers to a different noun phrase—namely, someone else who was present in the Prophet’s gathering.

To address this disagreement, the present study undertakes a syntactic, semantic, and intertextual analysis to determine who is truly intended by the verbs “frowned” and “turned away.” The syntactic analysis focuses on identifying the referent of the elliptical subject of these two verbs. The semantic analysis involves examining the Qur’anic ayahs in which the verbs *'abasa* (he frowned) and *tawallā* (he turned away) appear, and comparing their usage to determine whether these verbs—typically associated with the behavior of disbelievers—can also be applied to believers. As for intertextual analysis, it examines how other Qur’anic ayahs support the conclusion that it could not have been the

Prophet ﷺ who behaved in such a harsh manner—specifically by frowning at and turning away from the blind man.

2. literature review

The issue of who is referred to by the verbs 'abasa ("he frowned") and tawalla ("he turned away") is an old and ongoing one, dating back to the time of the Qur'an's revelation. Since then, Muslim scholars have continued to dispute the identity of the individual indicated by these two verbs. Numerous works have, therefore, been written on the matter. One such work is *Who Frowned and Turned Away the Blind Man?* by Mowlana Syed Aftab Haider. In this work, the author presents the views of the two main opposing scholarly groups and ultimately concludes that it cannot be the Prophet Muhammad who is addressed by these verbs. His conclusion is based on two main points: first, the ayah in question does not explicitly identify the subject of the verbs as the Prophet; rather, it is later commentators and interpreters of the Qur'an who propose this interpretation. Second, the Prophet's exemplary character—

described in the Qur'an as having "exalted moral character"—precludes such unbecoming behavior.

Another relevant work is *Verses of Blame and Admonition to the Messenger (Muhammad, PBUH): Verses 1–10 as a Model* by Jassim Muhammad Ali and Hassan Kadhim Assad. In this study, the authors also review the divergent scholarly positions and conclude that the Prophet is not the intended subject of the verbs. Their argument is grounded in the grammatical structure of the ayah which includes that the subject referred to is in the third-person singular, which, they argue, does not necessarily indicate the Prophet, but could plausibly refer to someone else present in his assembly. They further assert that attributing such behavior to the Prophet contradicts the Qur'anic affirmation of his noble character.

This present work is therefore not the first to engage with this debate. However, it is distinguished by its unique methodology, which does not follow the same approach as previous studies. Instead, it analyzes the ayah both syntactically and semantically, while also

employing the concept of intertextuality. This methodology proves to be effective and persuasive due to its objectivity. Without exaggeration, this work makes a valuable contribution to resolving a dispute that was once thought to be unresolvable.

3. Historical background

3.1 About the surah abasa

Surah *'abasa* ("he frowned") is a Meccan surah—meaning it was revealed in Mecca. It is named after the verb *'abasa* with which it opens. This surah consists of forty-two ayahs that deal with several key themes. One of the central themes is a rebuke of inappropriate behavior, which was the reason for the surah's revelation (Al-Şabuni, 2004:457).

From a chronological perspective, Surah *'abasa* was revealed after Surah *Al-Qalam* or Surah *Noon*), (the one revealed after the Surah *Iqra*) in which Allah praises the Prophet for his exemplary character (Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1997, p. 223), as in (4):

"And indeed, you are of a great moral character." (Qur'an 68:4)

(٤) (القلم: "وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ."

Given this praise, it may seem surprising that the Prophet—who is described as

possessing an exalted standard of character—would frown and turn away from a blind man. This apparent contradiction is explored further in the following section.

3.2 The occasion of revelation of the surah *'abasa* and scholarly disagreements

All Muslim scholars agree that Surah *'abasa* was revealed in connection with an incident involving a blind man named Abdullah Ibn Umm Maktum who came to the prophet seeking guidance. It happened that at that time, the prophet was engaged in a conversation with some chief pagans of *Quraysh* to invite them to Islam. The blind man, however, being ignorant or unaware of etiquette repeatedly said: 'O prophet guide me.'; in response, the prophet both frowned and turned him away (Ibn Kathir, n.d., p.609). According to some narrations, the Prophet later expressed remorse for this reaction. It is reported that whenever he encountered that blind man afterward, he would say: "Welcome to the one for whom my Lord reproved me of" (Al-Ṭabari, 2001, p. ٥٨٥). A reflective reading of this statement implies that the Prophet indeed frowned and turned away from the blind man, as otherwise, he would not have repeatedly acknowledged the incident in this manner.

In other words, this expression appears to be an implicit confession of the behavior that prompted the divine reproach. However, this narrative is not unanimously accepted by all Muslim scholars; some of them totally reject it because it markedly contradicts the ayah in (4) repeated here as (5):

(5) "And indeed, you are of a great moral character. " (Qur'an 68:4)
 " وَإِنَّكَ

لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقِي عَظِيمٍ. " (القلم : ٤)

These scholars question how it could be that Allah, having affirmed the Prophet's moral excellence, would then criticize him for behavior inconsistent with such a character? As Al-Ṭabāṭabā'i (1997, p. 223) notes, accepting this narrative raises theological tension: how can someone praised for exalted character be subject to divine rebuke for a lapse in behavior? Moreover, the narrative conflicts with several hadiths. One such hadith states:

Al-Manawi, 1972, p. 290). " (My Lord has disciplined me well."

"أدبني ربي فأحسن تأديبي

This saying suggests that Allah directly educated the Prophet, metaphorically acting as his mentor. From this perspective, it becomes difficult to

accept that the Prophet would commit an action such as frowning at a seeker of guidance—an act contrary to divine teaching. Another hadith that affirms this is:

"Indeed, Allah hates the one who frowns in the face of his brothers." (Al-Rayshahri, 2001, p. ٢٦٢)

"إن الله

يبيغض المعبس في وجه إخوانه

Hence, accepting the narrative would lead to the problematic implication—God forbid—that Allah's praise of the Prophet's character was inconsistent or inaccurate.

These theological and textual arguments form the basis for the scholarly objection to the widely cited narrative.

The following sections will explore these concerns in more depth, aiming to clarify the true referent of the verbs 'abasa "he frowned" and the verb "he turned away" in the ayah around which this study revolves.

4. A syntactic analysis of the ayah 'abasa wa-tawalla

It is already argued that the ayahs of the *Holy Qur'an* are not all of the same type in terms of clarity and interpretability. This means that not all its ayahs are

fundamental (محكمات) — those with clear, definitive meanings; some, however, are allegorical (متشابهات), meaning they are open to multiple interpretations. The ayah 'abasa wa-tawalā hence falls into the latter category as it admits two primary interpretations:

It was the prophet who frowned and turned away.

It was someone else in his assembly who frowned and turned away.

These two suggested interpretations of the ayah arise due to the elliptical subject (fā'il) of the two verbs which is a third person masculine singular pronoun, *he*. The referent of this pronoun is not explicitly mentioned in the ayah allowing it to refer either to the Prophet, or to another person in his assembly. This is the problem with the third person pronoun in the absence of its antecedent.

Notably, this pronoun remains problematic i.e., causing ambiguity even in the presence of its antecedent as in (6a):

(6a) And they feed food, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive. (Qur'an 76:8)

وَيُطْعَمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلَىٰ
حُبِّهِ مِسْكِينًا وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا. (الإنسان: ٨)

This ayah also lends itself to more than one interpretation due to the cliticized third-person pronoun -h (هـ) attached to the noun ḥubb (حب, "love"). One interpretation, which is almost agreed upon by translators, is that they feed food for the love of Allah as appears in the translation of the ayah by Yusuf Ali:

(6a) And they feed food, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive. (Ali,1989:)

Another interpretation is that they feed food despite their love for it viz. *the food* as appears in the second translation of the ayah in (6b).

(6b) And they give food in spite of love for it, to the needy, the orphan, and the captive (Sahih International).

The ambiguity here arises from the duality of reference of the pronoun -h (هـ): it may refer to Allah (i.e., love of Him), or to the food itself (i.e., despite loving it). This shows that pronominal ambiguity may persist even with an explicit antecedent.

From the perspective of transformational-generative syntax, such an ayah resembles an ambiguous sentence—that is, a sentence that can be derived from more than one deep (underlying) structure, resulting in

multiple surface-level meanings (Richards et al, 1992, p.15). Ambiguity of this kind is often not due to the words themselves, but rather to their syntactic arrangement, and is therefore termed *structural or grammatical ambiguity* (cf. Chomsky,1957). Fromkin and Rodman (1983, p.172) assert that structural ambiguity arises when the sentence's structure permits more than one interpretation, despite the clarity of its individual words. Hurford et al. (1983, p.128) reinforce this by stating that a sentence is structurally ambiguous when its constituents relate to each other in multiple valid ways. For further illustration, consider the following examples.

(7) (a) She fed her dog biscuits.

أطعمت كلبها بسكويٲ.

Here, the possessive pronoun *her* can refer either to the subject *she* (i.e., she fed her own dog), or to another female (i.e., she fed someone else's dog). Similarly:

(b) The man beat his son

because he was drunk.

ضرب الرجل ابنه لأنه كان مخمورا.

The pronoun *he* in (7b) can refer to either *the man* or *his son*, resulting in two

interpretations: the man was drunk, or his son was.

By analogy, the ayah '*abasa wa-tawalla*' is structurally ambiguous because the subject of the two verbs is unspecified and could refer either to the Prophet or to another individual in his company.

It is obvious that the grammatical analysis alone does not resolve the ambiguity. Thus, from a purely syntactic standpoint, the identity of the one who frowned and turned away remains open to interpretation. This means that the structural analysis alone does not conclusively determine the referent of the two verbs.

Let us now turn to the semantic analysis of the ayah to explore whether contextual or thematic elements help in disambiguating the subject.

5. A semantic analysis of the ayah '*abasa wa-tawalla*

The semantic analysis of the ayah '*abasa wa-tawalla*' includes giving the lexical meanings of its two verbs, their frequency of occurrence, followed by a juxtaposition of the ayahs in which they occur.

5.1. The lexical meanings of the verbs '*abasa* and *ta-walla*

The verb *'abasa* — meaning “he frowned” — carries a negative connotation in both Arabic and English. According to *Al-Mu'jam al-Jāmi' li-Ma'ānī al-Kalimāt* by Zaydan et.al (2001), it refers to the physical act of contracting the eyebrows or the area between the eyes to express displeasure, annoyance, or emotional discomfort. Similarly, the *Macmillan English Dictionary* defines “to frown” as “to move your eyebrows down and closer together because you are annoyed, worried, or thinking hard.” (Macmillan, 2002, p. 570). In both languages, the act of frowning signifies a nonverbal expression of negative or complex inner states.

The verb *tawalla* “he turned away”, also bears a negative sense in this context. Ibn Manzur, (1991, p. 414) defines it as “to turn away from someone or distance oneself from him.” This meaning is echoed in the *Collins English Dictionary* (2012), which describes “to turn away” as “to move or cause to move in a different direction so as not to face something.”

Given these meanings, it is natural to ask: how should we interpret these actions—seemingly negative—when they are attributed in the Qur'an to a Prophet

who is elsewhere described as having an exalted character?

Before this, however, let's first survey some of the ayahs in which these two verbs are used as evident in the ensuing section.

5. 2. A survey of the ayahs with the verbs *'abasa* and *ta-walla*

This section examines the usage of the verbs *'abasa* (“he frowned”) and *tawalla* (“he turned away”) in the Qur'an for better understanding of their semantic and contextual implications.

5. 2.1. Occurrences of the verb *'abasa*

The verb *'abasa*, '(he) frowned' occurs only three times in the entire Quran. These occurrences are listed below in the order in which they appear.

- (8) Then he frowned
And he scowled. (Qur'an 74:22)

ثُمَّ عَبَسَ وَبَسَرَ (المدثر: 22)

- (9) We only fear a Day
Of frowning and distress
From the side of our Lord.
(Qur'an 76:10)

إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِنْ رَبِّنَا يَوْمًا عَبُوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا

(الإنسان : ١٠)

(10) (The Prophet) frowned.

(Qur’an 80:1)

عَبَسَ وَتَوَلَّى (عبس):

(١)

5. 2. 2. Occurrences of the verb tawalla

Unlike ‘*abasa*, the verb *tawalla* occurs multiple times in the Qur’an. The following is a selection of representative ayahs.

(11) But on the contrary,

He rejected Truth

And turned away! (Qur’an

75: 32)

وَلَكِنْ كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى (القيامة : ٣٢)

(12) (The Prophet) frowned

And turned away. (Qur’an

80:1)

عَبَسَ وَتَوَلَّى

(١٣) But if any turn away

And disbelieve. (Qur’an 88

:23)

إِلَّا مَنْ تَوَلَّى وَكَفَرَ (الغاشية : ٢٣)

(14) Who give the lie to truth

And turned **their** backs. (The

Night 92: 16)

الَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى (الليل: ١٦)

From ayahs (11) through (14), it is evident that the verb *tawalla* (turned away) typically carries a negative sense whether

physically i.e., giving your back to someone as a way of avoiding meeting him/her as in (12) or spiritually or mentally i.e., rejecting the call or message of the Prophet with which he came with as in (11), (13) & (14).

5. 2. 3. A juxtaposition of the ayahs with the verbs ‘abasa and ta-walla

Let us first begin by juxtaposing the ayahs that include the verb ‘*abasa*, as illustrated in the table below:

Then he frowned And he scowled ثُمَّ عَبَسَ وَبَسَرَ	We only fear a day of frowning and distress from the side of our Lord. إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِنْ رَبِّنَا يَوْمًا عَبُوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا	(The prophet)frowned and scowled عَبَسَ تَوَلَّى
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ayah (15)

ayah (16)

ayah (17)

Table (1): Juxtaposition of Qur’anic Ayahs Using the Verb ‘abasa

The juxtaposition of these three ayahs demonstrates a thematic and lexical link through the recurrence of the verb ‘*abasa*, which appears in its perfect form in ayahs (15) and (17), and in its derivational form (عبوس) ‘*aboos*, meaning "frowning") in ayah (16). In ayahs (15) and (17), the verb refers to individuals, while in (16), it refers metaphorically to the Day of Judgment, representing the

wretched state of disbelievers on that day (Al- Shīrāzī, 2005,p.263).

Since the verb *'abasa* carries a negative connotation (see section 5.1), it is reasonable to expect that it would be associated with people of bad character—such as Al-Waleed ibn al-Mughira, a staunch opponent of the Prophet who claimed the Qur'an was the word of a man and not divine revelation. According to several scholars, ayah (15) was revealed specifically about him (Al-Ṭūsī n.d:178). Similarly, ayah (16) that refers to disbelievers, and ayah (17) that could also refer to someone of like character. It is surprising, therefore, that many classical *mufasssirun* (exegetes) attribute the frowning in ayah (17) to the Prophet (pbuh), despite his widely recognized noble character. This interpretation risks drawing a false equivalence between the Prophet and Al-Waleed—both being described with the same negative verb—thereby undermining the unique moral status of the Prophet. Among those who make this attribution is *Al-Qurtubi*, (2006,p. 378) who comments on ayahs (15) and (17) as appears respectively in (18) & (19) .

(18) “Then he (i.e. *Al-Waleed*) frowned by contracting his eyebrows in the faces of the believers when they called him

to Islam. It is also said he frowned and scowled at the Prophet when the Prophet invited him to Islam.”

ثم عبس (في إشارة الى الوليد) أي قَطَّب بين عينيه في وجوه المؤمنين. قيل: عبس وبسر على النبي - صلى الله عليه وسلم - حين دعاه .

(19) “It was the Prophet (pbuh) who frowned at Ibn Umm Maktum. The verb *'abasa* here means to grimace by twisting the lips or exposing the teeth.”

مكتوم ومعنى عبس : أي كَلَح بوجهه. "إنما عبس النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم لأبن أم

Here, *Al-Qurtubi* establishes a semantic and moral equivalence by applying the verb *'abasa* to both Al-Waleed and the Prophet. This suggests that *Al-Qurtubi* saw no issue in using the same verb for two radically different individuals, which arguably neglects the elevated status of the Prophet and the theological concept of *nubuwwah* (prophethood)—defined as “a divine selection of a person to whom divine teachings are revealed to lead people to the path of perfection and happiness.” (see: [https:// wikishia.net](https://wikishia.net)).

Another exegete who follows this line of interpretation is Al-Razi (1995, p.٥٦) with his famous statement ,which

affirms that it is the prophet who frowned, as in (20).

(٢٠) The commentators are unanimously agreed that the one who frowned and turned away was the Messenger of God (pbuh).

أجمع المفسرون على أن الذي عيس " وتولى، هو الرسول عليه الصلاة والسلام.

A third exegete, who is a modern scholar, Al-Ḥomṣi (2002, p. 576), provides his exegesis of the ayah in (15), as true in (21):

(٢١) "He (i.e., Al-Waleed) wrinkled the space between his eyebrows when his attempts to discredit the Qur'an had failed".

"قَطَّب وجهه (في إشارة للوليد) لما ضاقت عليه الحيل ولم يجد مطعناً."

Yet strangely, he uses the same expression in reference to the Prophet in explaining the ayah in (17) as appears in (22).

(22) "He (i.e., the Prophet), with his honourable face, frowned by wrinkling or contracting his eyebrows" Al-Ḥomṣi (2002, p. 585).

"قَطَّب وجهه الشريف."

These interpretations are based on a narrow syntactic reading of the pronoun "he" in the phrase 'abasa wa tawalla (ayah 17), presuming it refers to the Prophet despite no explicit mention. An alternative and more contextually grounded view is offered by the modern Sudanese scholar Abu Qurūn in his book: *Shifā' al-Themam min Ittihāmāt al-Muslimīn li'l-Nabiyy al-A'zam* (Clearing Consciences from the Accusations of Muslims against the Greatest Prophet) (2013: pp.94-96) argues that:

- The frowning and turning away were done by a pagan who was in the Prophet's assembly.
- This pagan became angry when the Prophet turned to listen to a blind man (Ibn Umm Maktum), whom he considered inferior.
- The pagan complained, saying, "He preferred that despised blind man to me, the chief of my people."
- Allah then revealed Surah 'Abasa in response to this man's arrogance, not to admonish the Prophet.

This reading is more rational and theologically consistent, as it:

1. Exonerates the Prophet from blameworthy behavior.

2.Avoids equating him with a hostile disbeliever like Al-Waleed.

3.Aligns with the Qur'an's own methodology in differentiating between the Prophet and the disbelievers, as shown in (23):

(23) Is then the man who believes

No better than the man who is, rebellious and wicked?

Not equal are they. (Qur'an 32:18)

"أَفَمَنْ كَانَ مُؤْمِنًا كَمَنْ كَانَ فَاسِقًا لَا يَسْتَوُونَ" (السجدة: ١٨)

This is emphasized by Al-Nabulsi (2004-2025) in his encyclopedia, where he asserts that to equate a believer and an unbeliever in this life or the next is not only unjust, but contradictory to God's very nature as Just and Wise. It also contradicts with His existence—since God is existed, then the two are never treated equally.

Having proved that the Prophet is acquitted from frowning, it is then logical that he must also be acquitted from turning

away, since both verbs co-occur and share the same negative connotation. Hence to accept, otherwise, that the Prophet turned away would imply acceptance of similar verbs of reproach, as seen in the following ayahs:

(The prophet frowned and turned away. عَبَسَ تَوَلَّى	But if any turn away and disbelieve. إِلَّا مَنْ تَوَلَّى وَكَفَرَ	Who give the lie to truth and turned their backs. الَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى
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(24)

(25)

(26)

Table (2): Juxtaposition of Qur'anic Ayahs Using the Verb *tawalla*

Each occurrence of the verb *tawalla* (turned away) is paired with a verb of negative moral value. It is, then, unthinkable that such a verb could be attributed to the Prophet, who is infallible or (*ma'sūm*) and exalted in character.

6. An intertextual analysis of the ayah abasa wa-tawalla

The acquittal of the Prophet from being the one intended by the two verbs in the ayah *abasa wa-tawalla* can also be supported through intertextual analysis. This requires, first, an understanding of the concept of intertextuality. According to the Webster Dictionary (2000, p.612), intertextuality is "the complex interrelationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or interpretation of the text." This understanding is rooted in the work of Julia Kristeva, who introduced the term intertextuality. Kristeva argued that no text exists in isolation; rather, every text is a "mosaic of quotations," constructed from and in dialogue with previous texts and cultural codes (1982, pp.52–91). Her concept suggests that a proper understanding of any text requires considering it in relation to other relevant texts, rather than treating it in isolation. As Moyise (2002, 418) puts it, "intertextuality suggests that the meaning of a text is not fixed but is open to revision as new texts come along and reposition it."

Hence, considering the given ayah in light of other Qur'anic ayahs that focus on the character of the Prophet reveals a consistent portrayal of him as a figure of compassion, gentleness, and concern for

the believers. For instance, one ayah affirms that it is through God's mercy that the Prophet dealt gently with his followers. Had he been harsh or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around him:

"(27) It is part of the Mercy of God that thou dost deal gently with them. Were thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee." (Qur'an 3:159)

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ
لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ
(حَوْلِكَ ... آل عمران : ١٥٩)

This ayah, among others, supports the view that attributing the verbs '*abasa* ("he frowned") and '*tawalla* ("he turned away") to the Prophet contradicts the broader Qur'anic depiction of his character.

Similarly, the ayah in (28) that describes the Prophet as deeply concerned for the believers, characterized by kindness and mercy towards them:

(28) "Now hath come unto you an apostle from among yourselves: it grieves him that you should perish; ardently anxious is he over you; to the Believers is he most kind and merciful." (Qur'an 99:128)

لَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِيصٌ
عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ (التوبة: ١٢٨)

These and other ayahs such as those in (29), (30) and (31) form a cohesive textual mosaic that stands in contrast to the image suggested if the verbs "frowned" and "turned away" are attributed to the Prophet. Such attribution not only contradicts the Prophet's consistent portrayal, but also challenges the Qur'an's internal coherence.

(٢٩) "But lower thy wing (in gentleness) to the Believers." (Qur'an 15: 88)

وَإِخْفِضْ جَنَاحَكَ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ (

الحجر: ٨٨)

) We sent thee not, but as a Mercy for all creatures." (Qur'an 21:107 "(30)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ (الأنبياء: ١٠٧)

(31) "And lower thy wing to the Believers who follow thee." (Qur'an 26 :215)

وَإِخْفِضْ

جَنَاحَكَ لِمَنِ اتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ. (الشعراء: ٢١٥)

In the light of this, it is then more plausible to argue , both from an intertextual and even a theological standpoint, that these verbs must be referring to someone else present at the time that blind man came to the Prophet rather than the Prophet himself. This conclusion is further maintained by the

fact that how come the Prophet whose key mission is to guide people shows a dismissive attitude towards someone sincerely seeking guidance.

7. The pitfalls in the translations of the ayah abasa wa-twalla

Below are eight well-known English translations of the ayah 'abasa wa-tawalla'

1. *Abdullah Yusuf Ali*: (The prophet) frowned and turned away.

2. *Mohammad Marmaduke Pickhthall*: He frowned and turned away.

3. *Mohammad Mahmoud Ghali*: He frowned and turned away.

4. *Sahih International*: He [i.e., the Prophet] frowned and turned away.

5. *Muhammad Habib Shakir*: He frowned and turned (his) back.

6. *Muhammad Sarwar*: He frowned and then turned away.

7. *Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Tqi-ud-Din al-Hilali* : (The Prophet (peace be upon him)

frowned and turned away.

8. *Arthur John Arberry*: He frowned and turned away.

Carefully examining these translations, they can be classified into two groups.

Group One: This group includes *Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Sahih International, and Muhsin Khan & al-Hilali*. These translators

explicitly attribute the actions described in the ayah to the Prophet (pbuh) by using the noun phrase “the Prophet”—either directly in the text or within parentheses. It is worth noting that *Yusuf Ali* uses parentheses to indicate this subject, which technically places him between the two groups.

Group Two: The remaining five translators—Pickthall, Ghali, Shakir, Sarwar, and Arberry—use the third-person pronoun “he”, without clarifying its referent. While this might seem more neutral, these translations often lead readers to interpret “he” as referring to the Prophet, especially when read in the light of traditional exegesis. The main issue with both groups is their implicit or explicit assignment of the verbs “frowned” and “turned away” to the Prophet, despite the fact that the ayah does not explicitly mention him. Group One does this directly, relying on widely accepted *tafsir* (exegesis) traditions without considering alternative semantic or syntactic possibilities. Their translations seem based on the surface structure of the ayah rather than its deeper meaning. Group Two, although less direct, still implies the same attribution by using an ambiguous pronoun “he”, whose antecedent is not identified. In translation, this omission becomes problematic, as it allows—if not encourages—the assumption that the

Prophet is the one being referenced. This reflects a lack of critical engagement with the linguistic and contextual nuances of the ayahs.

In both cases, the translators fall into the interpretive pitfall of attributing these verbs to the Prophet while the ayah itself does not make such an assignment explicit. Hence, To avoid this issue, the researcher suggests an alternative translation that preserves both semantic neutrality and theological accuracy: "*He—not the Prophet—was the one who frowned and turned away*".

This rendering makes it clear that the Prophet is not the subject of the verbs; it also aligns more closely with the findings of the syntactic, semantic, and intertextual analyses presented in this study.

8. Discussion and conclusions

In the ayah “*abasa wa tawalla*”, the address is delivered in the third person singular rather than in the second person, and that this linguistic choice introduces a significant ambiguity. This structural nuance has led many Qur'anic exegetes to attribute the actions of “frowning and turning away” to the Prophet, rather than another figure present during the assembly. However, such an interpretation should not be taken as definitive. Upon this, a critical question arises: If Allah truly intended to refer to the Prophet, then

why did He not directly address him—for instance, by saying, “O Prophet, you frowned and turned away”? Such explicit language would have clarified the subject and potentially resolved the long-standing debate that persists among scholars. This ambiguity further invites a deeper theological and rhetorical reflection. If the Prophet were indeed the subject of these actions, could the lack of explicit mention be an act of divine mercy—intended to protect the dignity of the Prophet, who is elsewhere described in the Qur’an as having the highest moral character? Or does the indirectness serve a distinct spiritual or rhetorical purpose? In response to these questions, the present study was undertaken to critically revisit and potentially resolve this enduring issue. The approach employed integrates a syntactic, semantic, and intertextual analysis of the ayah. Through this multi-layered methodology, the study arrives at two key conclusions: First, the subject of the verbs “frowned” and “turned away” is not the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), but rather another individual who was present during the event. This conclusion emerges not from syntax alone—which remains inconclusive—but from a convergence of semantic and intertextual evidence. Semantically, these verbs frequently denote qualities of harshness or

disregard—attributes that, within the Qur’anic context, are characteristically ascribed to figures such as al-Waleed ibn al-Mughirah, rather than to the Prophet, whose exemplary moral character is consistently affirmed. Intertextually, the Qur’an’s broader portrayal of the Prophet is one of deep compassion and moral refinement—traits that contradict the behavior described in this ayah. Second, an analysis of eight prominent English translations of the ayah reveals a consistent trend: most translators have either explicitly or implicitly attributed these actions to the Prophet—using either the noun phrase “the Prophet” or the pronoun “he” to denote him. This pattern suggests a prevailing reliance on traditional *tafsir* and a tendency toward surface-level readings, without sufficient engagement with deeper semantic or intertextual dimensions. The findings point to the influence of classical exegesis on modern translation choices which are often at the expense of critical re-evaluation.

٩. Recommendations

In view of the above discussion and conclusions, this study recommends the following.

1.Re-evaluation of Classical Exegesis

Given the evolving nature of Qur'anic exegesis, modern scholars are encouraged to revisit and critically assess the traditional attribution of the verbs *'abasa* and *tawalla* in light of the Prophet's consistently affirmed moral excellence. This recommendation arises from the observation that the verb *'abasa* in the Qur'an is explicitly associated with figures like *al-Waleed ibn al-Mughirah*—individuals known for arrogance and moral failure. Applying this verb to the Prophet contradicts not only the linguistic pattern but also the Qur'anic portrayal of the Prophet's exalted character. The same applies to the verb *tawalla*, which consistently carries a negative connotation across various Qur'anic contexts.

Arabic. Therefore, A more linguistically grounded approach would yield translations that are both more accurate and more reflective of the Qur'an's literary complexity. These two recommendations are particularly important as they help safeguard the reputation and moral integrity of the Prophet, and thus closing the door to misinterpretations that may be used—intentionally or unintentionally—to undermine his prophetic standing.

2. Greater Linguistic Attention in Translation

Translators of the Holy Qur'an should place greater emphasis on linguistic and contextual analysis rather than relying solely on classical exegesis. Many existing translations hastily attribute these actions to the Prophet without sufficient

engagement with the syntactic and semantic ambiguity present in the original

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