

Re-Visiting the Meaning of 'zann' in the Qur'an

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Abstract

The Qur'anic term, 'zann,' is usually understood and translated as conjecture. However, I argue that the Qur'an uses 'zann' to mean dogmatic zeal or, in other words, being zealous to a certain belief. For conjecture, the Qur'an uses the root 'h-s-b,' such as, 'ayaḥṣabu.' Although the Qur'an may criticize some people's conjectures, it does not criticize the act of formulating opinions with the root 'h-s-b.' However, the Qur'an does criticize the act of 'zann.' This further emphasizes the distinction between conjecture and 'zann,' according to the Qur'an. The main emphasis is that when the Qur'an requires people to shun most 'zann,' it is argued that it is asking to shun zealous beliefs and dogmas, and it is not asking to shun the formulation of conjectures. The method used is philological, in which the cognates are analyzed in their contexts and compared with their uses in the Qur'an. Defining 'zann' as dogmatic zeal rather than conjecture has far-reaching implications in understanding Qur'anic epistemology and the epistemic process it expects its audience to have.

Introduction

In this article, I argue that the meaning of the Qur'anic term, 'zann,' as conjecture, is not the original intended meaning in the Qur'an. 'Aqil 'Akmüş 'Abd argues that the debates amongst the early grammarians on the origin of Arabic terms, whether a verb or gerund, caused how the majority defined the term 'zann' mostly as doubt rather than certainty.¹ The Qur'anic intention behind 'zann' might be closely associated with its cognate in other Semitic languages, such as Hebrew and Aramaic, where the meaning of the root 'z-n-n' is zeal or, in other words, believing in something zealously, which is a definition also attested in medieval Arabic lexicons and traditional Qur'anic commentaries.² In that sense, the argument propounded in this article is not new in that it is completely re-defining the term 'zann' in the Qur'an that does not already exist, but what is novel is the argument in discounting its definition as conjecture as a possible intended meaning.

The purpose behind this study is to act as a step towards understanding the type of epistemology that the Qur'an expects from its audience. If the act of performing 'zann' is mostly criticized in the Qur'an and the term is understood as conjecture, then it would pose a

¹ 'Aqil 'Akmüş 'Abd, "'zann' fil-Qur'an al-karim: Diräsah ft mafhüm al-taḍäd," *Journal of al-Qadisiya in Arts and Educational Science*, 4/3-4 (2005), pp. 65-80.

² Ibn Manzür (d. 711/1311), *Lisän al-'arab* (Beirut: Dār Şadir, n.d.), vol. 13, pp. 272-275.

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contradiction in the Qur'an. The Qur'an has manifold passages that highly encourage thinking, contemplating, and pondering, which by definition means that one needs to resort to mental and cognitive exercises that allow for the formation of conjectures and opinions. If the act of forming conjectures is criticized, then how is one expected to think and contemplate? It, thus, causes an epistemic dilemma and inconsistency.

As such, it is argued that when the Qur'an frequently abhors 'zann' and accuses nonbelievers of resorting to 'zann,' the Qur'an is accusing nonbelievers of being zealous to their unwavering beliefs and dogmas while unwilling to accept any alternative, even if some evidence against their dogmas and beliefs is presented. The alternative term used by the Qur'an to mean conjecture or a thought exercise is from the root 'h-s-b.' While the Qur'an mostly portrays 'zann' negatively, in which it is something best avoided, it does not portray the root 'h-s-b' in a negative manner, even though it describes examples when some of the conjectures and thoughts, using the root 'h-s-b,' are incorrect. Therefore, 'yazunnün' would not be synonymous with 'yaḥṣabün' in the Qur'anic language.

Traditional and modern interpretation

Traditional Qur'anic exegetes have given the root 'z-n-n' various meanings, from believing in something with certainty to mere conjecture.³ They prefer one meaning over the other based on context.⁴ Usually, the preference depends on ideological grounds. For this reason, the meaning of this term remains inconsistent within the Qur'an, where sometimes it is used as a solid and zealous belief, while at other times, speculation, or some definition in between those two.⁵ This term has been known by traditional exegetes to have two opposite meanings at the same time, or an antithesis, which can only be determined through context.⁶ It is a very prominent antithetical term that Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/940) chose to have it as the first entry to discuss in his book, *al-Aḍḍād*.⁷ According to him, the term carries four meanings, two of which are opposites, doubt (*shakk*) and certainty (*yaqīn*), with the non-opposite meanings, lie (*kadhb*) and accusation (*tuhma*).⁸

Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī (d. 395/1005) also gave special attention to the term 'zann' in his *al-Wujūh wal-naẓā'ir* stating that it means two opposing definitions: certainty and doubt.⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) defines 'zann' as being zealous towards one belief over its antithesis

³ 'Abdulsalām I. M. Al-Majīd, "Aḥkām al-zann wa-alfāzuhu wa-aqsāmuhu fil-sharḥ al-Islāmiyyah," *Majallah abḥāth kulliyah al-tarbiyah al-asāsiyyah*, 7/2 (2008), pp. 151-170.

⁴ Tanzil A. 'Abdulwahhāb, *al-Zann fil-Qur'an: Diräsah mawḍū'iyah*, Master Thesis (Khartoum: International University of Africa).

⁵ Ṭayyib Ḥ. Seyyed-Maḥmūd, "Ma'nāshnāst 'zann' der Qur'an karīm," *Vijah 'ulūm Qur'an va-Ḥadīth*, 1/1 (2011), pp. 41-64.

⁶ 'Abd, "'zann' fil-Qur'an."

⁷ Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/940), *al-Aḍḍād*, ed. Muḥammad A. Ibrahīm (Beirut: al-'Asriyyah, 1987), pp. 14-16.

⁸ Ibn al-Anbārī, *al-Aḍḍād*, pp. 14-16.

⁹ Abū Hilāl Al-'Askarī (d. 395/1005), *al-Wujūh wal-naẓā'ir*, ed. Muḥammad 'Uthmān (Cairo: al-Thaqāfah al-Dīniyyah, 2007), pp. 332-333.