

PROGRESSIVE ISLAM IN
PRACTICE



SEXUAL DIVERSITY & ISLAM PT 3

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WASN'T THE STORY OF THE PROPHET LUT (PBUH) CLEARLY ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?

Not exactly. The story of the Prophet Lut (PBUH) —called “Lot” in English —can be read and understood in different ways.



ISN'T THERE ONLY ONE WAY TO READ THE QUR'AN?

No. There are several ways to read the Qur'an. For example:

- People can read literally: reading word for word, using exact definitions.
- People can read semantically: thinking about a word's meaning in the sentence and in other places in the Qur'an.
- People also can read thematically: finding the meaning of a whole passage by looking at how it relates to themes in the Qur'an.



WHY NOT JUST READ THE QUR'AN LITERALLY?

Reading the Qur'an literally is not as simple as it sounds as it can lead to misunderstanding a whole passage. For example, in English, the word "hot" can mean:

- something or someone has a high temperature
- something or someone is popular
- someone is attractive
- something or someone is causing disagreement or strong feelings

To make things even more complicated, meanings can change over time. Since the words "homosexuality" and "homosexual" do not appear in the Qur'an at all, we must read the Qur'an in a different way if we want to find out what the Qur'an can tell us about homosexuality. If we insist on reading the Qur'an literally, we can only say "The word 'homosexuality' doesn't appear in the Qur'an, therefore the Qur'an tells us nothing about the subject."



HOW IS A SEMANTIC READING DIFFERENT?

A semantic reading looks at the word in context. Above, we saw how a word can mean different things in different contexts. Even when a word means the same thing in different contexts, the overall meaning can be different.

In the following examples “hot” always means “has a high temperature”—but in each case the relative meaning is very different.

- a hot cup of coffee -> good
- a hot bowl of ice cream -> not good
- a hot bath for an adult -> refreshing
- a hot bath for a baby -> dangerous

A semantic reading of the Qur’an lets the reader look at the meanings of words as they are used in the story of the Prophet Lut(PBUH). The reader then can look at how those words are used in other places in the Qur’an. From this, the reader can tell more about whether the words refer to sexual acts and whether the words are used to mean something good or something bad.



WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THEMATIC READING?

Thematic readings let readers think about the bigger picture of what they are reading. It lets readers consider the time and place of the stories in the Qur'an, as well as other circumstances. Thematic reading is not a "new" way to read the Qur'an. It is actually something that Muslims do automatically when reading some parts of the Qur'an. Classical stories of the Prophets, called Qisas al-Anbiya, also contain thematic readings. These stories are not exact records of the Prophets' lives. They are not intended to be read as fact. Instead, they were written to make sense of the Qur'an's short references to the lives of the Prophets. Without knowing the whole story, the short references in the Qur'an may not make much sense. The Qisas al-Anbiya try to fill in the blanks so that the Qur'an references make sense.



DO SEMANTIC AND THEMATIC READINGS REVEAL ANYTHING ABOUT WHY THE PEOPLE OF LUT WERE PUNISHED BY GOD?

Yes. In the story, the Prophet Lut (PBUH) first advised the people of the city of Sodom to follow God's path, but they ignored him. Later, the men of Sodom threatened to rape Lut's male visitors, who were angels disguised as men. God then punished the entire city of Sodom for rejecting their Prophet (Lut) and for "transgressions." Some scholars interpret the "transgressions" in the story of Lut to refer to male homosexuality. Yet the word "transgressions" in the Qur'an can mean something sexual or something non-sexual. Men were not the only ones punished in the destruction of Sodom. According to the Qur'an, the whole city was destroyed. Lut's wife is specifically mentioned. Were Lut's wife, other women and the children of Sodom punished for male homosexuality? That does not seem to be a reasonable conclusion.



DO SEMANTIC AND THEMATIC READINGS REVEAL ANYTHING ABOUT WHY THE PEOPLE OF LUT WERE PUNISHED BY GOD? II

A thematic reading of the story of Lut can be found in the Qisas al-Anbiya (classical stories of the Prophets). A story written by the scholar Muhammad ibn Abdallah Al-Kisa'i puts the strange behavior of the men of the city of Sodom in a context that makes sense. Al-Kisa'i suggests that the people of Sodom had taken to showing their city's dominance by raping strangers. They were showing that they could take what they wanted from others. In that way, people became afraid to raid the city. This showed aggressiveness, stinginess and greed—all things that would justify their punishment. A thematic reading also tells us that the story's main purpose was to show that people had rejected their prophets in the past, as some rejected Muhammad during his lifetime, and how those who rejected prophets were punished. This is clear from the context of the story of Lut, which is placed among other stories with the same theme.



IS THERE ANY OTHER REASON TO THINK THIS IS THE CORRECT WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE STORY OF LUT?

Yes. In two hadith—or stories of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)—there is support for this understanding of the story of Lut. In one, the Prophet Muhammad asked the archangel Jibra'il (Gabriel) why and how the people of Lut were destroyed. Jibra'il responded that they did not clean themselves after using the bathroom or having sex, they did not share their food, and they were covetous (wanting things that belonged to others) and stingy. In another hadith, someone asked the Prophet Muhammad about the penalty for stinginess and the Prophet told the story of the people of Lut.



BASED ON THIS READING, WHAT SHOULD MUSLIMS TAKE AS THE LESSON OF THE STORY OF LUT?

Based on this reading, the story of Lut can instruct Muslims to:

- follow the example set by the Prophet Lut(PBUH) of hospitality, generosity and protection of people who are vulnerable, such as travelers.
- avoid stinginess and greed.
- condemn rape—and speak out against any use of sexual acts to coerce or control.
- uphold and respect relationships based on consent, fairness, mutual support and love for one another.

