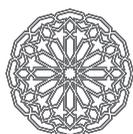


A Tentative Guide
to the Themes of the
SURAHS of the QUR'AN

A Tentative Guide
to the Themes of the
SURAHHS of the **QUR'AN**



H. R. H. PRINCE
GHAZI BIN MUHAMMAD



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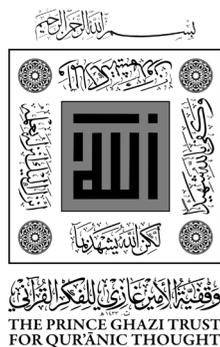
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The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

‘Those who know cannot get enough of it [the Qur’an] . . . despite constant repetition, and its wonders never cease.’

(Tirmidhi)



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About the Author



H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan (b. 1966 CE) was educated at Harrow School, UK; received his BA Summa cum Laude from Princeton University, NJ, USA; his first PhD from Trinity College, Cambridge University, UK, and his second PhD from Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. He is a Professor of Islamic Philosophy and his book *Love in the Holy Qur'an* has been widely acclaimed, has gone into ten editions and has been translated into a number of languages. He is also the author of *A Thinking Person's Guide to Islam* (2016). He also serves as Chief Advisor for Religious and Cultural Affairs to H.M. King Abdullah II ibn Al-Hussein of Jordan.

Preface



The Holy Qur'an is an eternal guidance for the humankind for all times to come. Its miraculous style is different from normal books authored by human beings. The people of Arabia, whether believing in it, or not, fully surrendered to its eloquence, beauty and effective expressions that penetrate into the depths of one's heart.

When reciting the verses of the Holy Qur'an, a general reader feels that it is a combination of different points of guidance without an apparent sequence. Neither the Holy Qur'an itself, nor the Holy Prophet ﷺ has ever indicated that any of its surahs has a specific subject around which all of its verses revolve. That is why a considerable group of exegetes of the Holy Qur'an is of the view that its different verses, despite their eternal application, were revealed in the backdrop of different needs of a particular time. Being a book of guidance revealed gradually, it is like the different types of guidance given by a father to his beloved son, or by a kind teacher to his pupils, which are directed according to their needs at different times, and are not necessarily arranged in a logical sequence. Therefore, no logical sequence should necessarily be sought in all the verses of the Holy Qur'an, nor should a particular subject be allocated for each surah.

There is however another school of exegetes who believe that the verses of the Holy Qur'an are not without sequence. Based on this premise they try to explain the linkage between all the verses according to their own interpretation. The most outstanding work of this nature is that of Al-Biq'a'i, in his '*Nazmuddurar fi Tanāsubil 'Ayati was-Surwar*' in 22 volumes.

This view finds support from the fact, admitted by all, that the order of revelation of verses is different from the order of their arrangement in their present form. Sayyiduna Uthman b. Affan ﷺ the third Caliph of

the Holy Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said that whenever a group of verses was revealed to the Holy Prophet ﷺ, he called one of his scribes and said to him: 'Place these verses in that surah in which such and such is mentioned.'

This indicates that these verses had some kind of link with the surah in which were are ordered to be placed by the Holy Prophet ﷺ. Thus, it appears that the verses of the Holy Qur'an, as they are arranged by the Holy Prophet ﷺ in their present form have some link with each other, though very subtle, that cannot always be apprehended at first glance.

It is necessary to note that understanding the basic message of the verses of the Holy Qur'an never depends on understanding this type of fine linkage. However, the scholars who undergo a deep study of the miraculous style of the Holy Qur'an are in a way invited to find out this type of fine linkage, and the exegetes have made efforts to find it out on the basis of their *ijtihad*. This is a field of study open to new thoughts which may vary from person to person without in any manner affecting the evident meanings of the verses, or changing their import that does not depend on such an effort. All the attempts made by the scholars in discovering sequence of the verses of the Holy Qur'an and their mutual relationship should always be seen in this light.

Once, during an informal and friendly meeting with my honorable friend, H.R.H. Prince Ghazi b. Muhammad of Jordan, he expressed the idea that every surah of the Holy Qur'an seems to have some basic theme that is the centre point of all its verses, and that it would be advisable to compile these themes. Being an intricate subject, I found myself unable to undertake such an effort, but I felt that Allah *Subhanahu wa Ta'ala* might have inspired his heart to do the job, and therefore I encouraged him to do so.

Some months after this discussion, His Highness was kind enough to send to me a sample of the work he was doing, which by and large appealed to me, and along with some humble suggestions I requested him to proceed. The outcome of his effort is the thesis now at hand.

This thesis on the thematic sequence of the Holy Qur'an is truly a pioneering endeavor to gain insight into this intricate subject. I have had the privilege of paging through and benefitting from some parts of its manuscript, and have found that the sequence of verses in the light of the

proposed theme seems logical and beautifully described. With regard to the first twelve surahs of the Holy Qur'an, he has convincingly detailed how the basic theme of each surah is reflected in the sequence of its verses. About the rest of surahs he has just listed the theme, as he inferred from his study, inviting the reader to apply it to the verses of each surah on the pattern he has outlined in the first twelve surahs.

Another interesting study undertaken in this thesis is the relationship of his proposed themes to the *fada'il* (merits) of different surahs mentioned in the *Ahadith*. He has succinctly described how his proposed themes of the surahs are in accord with their merits reported from the Holy Prophet ﷺ in different traditions (some of them very authentic, and others though weak in their chain of narrators, yet tolerable at least in *fada'il*.) This particular feature of the thesis has shed light on a novel dimension of *Tadabburul Qur'an* (the contemplation of the Qur'an).

It is noteworthy though that since the basic themes of the surahs are not mentioned by the Holy Qur'an itself, nor are they referred to in the Sunnah, any endeavor to determine them, as pointed out earlier and admitted by the honourable author himself in his introduction, is a matter of *Ijtihad* which may vary from person to person. It is therefore possible that there be another opinion in discovering the Quranic themes. His Highness has also endeavored to answer possible contentions on the nature of this novel endeavor in his scholarly introduction. It is utmost precaution on his part that, instead of insisting on his discoveries, he named his endeavor as 'Tentative Guide'. I trust that the current pioneering work will, *in sha' Allah*, form a basis for further study in this intricate field. May Allah *ta'ala* grant this work His Approval and may He make it beneficial.

MUHAMMAD TAQI USMANI

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ
وَالصَّلَاةُ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَى خَاتَمِ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ وَالْمُرْسَلِينَ

A Tentative Guide
to the Themes of the
SURAHS of the QUR'AN

I

THEORY



There has been a lot written about the subjects of the Qur'an. Most famously perhaps, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d. 505 AH/1111 CE) argued in his book *The Jewels of the Qur'an* that the Qur'an's 6,236 verses all deal with one (and some more than one) of only six basic subjects. These six subjects are: (1) God and His Attributes, Names, and Acts (including His creation); (2) spiritual wisdom and the path towards God (especially through remembrance of God); (3) descriptions of the afterlife and the next world; (4) stories of the pre-Islamic prophets, messengers and sages—as well as disbelievers and sinners; (5) arguments for belief and refutations of disbelief; and (6) laws, commandments, prohibitions and prescriptions for life. In fact it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a single verse in the Qur'an that does not go back to one of these subjects. The reason for this, Ghazali says, is that:

'The secret of the Qur'an . . . and its ultimate aim consist in calling people to God. . . . For this reason the surahs of the Qur'an and its verses are limited to six types'. (Ghazali, *The Jewels of the Qur'an*, 3)

In other words, the Qur'an is focused only on things that are useful to people—whether they understand them or not—in their religion, and also therefore in their spiritual, moral and social lives

Now most of the chapters ('*surahs*', in Arabic) of the Qur'an (with notable exceptions like *Surah* 112 [*Surat Al-Ikhlās*] which deals with only God and His Attributes, Names and Acts) touch on more than one subject.

So it may be asked, do the individual *surahs* contain particular underlying themes that hold them—and the unitary combination of subjects they address—together?

Over the centuries, a number of Qur'anic commentators (notably: Fakhr Al-Din Razi [d. 606/1209] in his Commentary *Mafatih Al-Ghayb*; Burhan Al-Din Al-Biqā'i in his Commentary *Nazm al-Durar fi Tanasub al-Ayati wal-Surwar* [d. 855/1451], and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti [d. 911/1505] in his little book *Asrar Tartib al-Qur'an*; see also Ahmad al-'Alawi's [d. 1353/1934] mystical Commentary on the *surahs* on the *Fatihah*, *Al-Najm*, and *Al-Asr*) have shown the hidden connections between consecutive verses in *surahs*, and between consecutive *surahs* in the Qur'an. However, little has been written on the subject of the themes of the *surahs* of the Qur'an as such. Nevertheless, it does seem that each and every chapter of the Qur'an has a theme that runs through it. These 'underlying themes' seem to invisibly hold the individual verses of a *surah* together, somewhat like the string ('*nazhm*' in Arabic) of a pearl necklace holds the pearls together and makes them into a single necklace. The themes seem to relate to—and underlie—every single verse in that *surah*. They seem to help to explain not only what the *surah* is about in general but why one verse or passage follows the next. They seem to show a remarkable—indeed miraculous—and underlying unified content and coherence to every *surah* in the Qur'an.

This is actually implied in the very word '*surah*', which comes from the Arabic word '*sur*' meaning 'wall' and so shows the distinct and separate character of each *surah*. Moreover, there are studies showing (see, for example Bassam Sa'eh's *The Miraculous Language of the Qur'an*) the unique and distinct vocabulary and grammatical forms in the individual *surahs* of the Qur'an. It is also very significant to note that the *surah* is the smallest unit of the Qur'an that cannot be faked or forged, and that the Qur'an contains two Divine Challenges to people about attempting to fake a single *surah* of the Qur'an (see: 2: 23–24 and 10:37–38), and, indeed, this suggests that every *surah* is a unique and integrated 'entity'.

The themes seem to not only show the unified content and coherence of every *surah*, but of the Qur'an as a whole. For the most part they occur, as will be seen, remarkably, in complementary pairs next to each other in the order of the Qur'an itself (e.g. *surahs* 2 and 3; 47 and 48; 73 and 74;