Book Reviews


*Le Festin* by Michael Cuypers is a welcome edition to the growing number of studies of Qur‘ān in the field of rhetorical analysis and intertextuality of sacred scriptures. The book develops a new approach distinguishing Semitic from other rhetoric traditions. It was translated into English in 2009 and stirred interesting debate among the scholars of interfaith studies. The book deserves serious attention as it raises several significant issues for modern Qur‘ān studies.

One of the features that distinguish modern from the earlier Qur‘ān studies is their focus on its study as a coherent book. Mustansir Mir (1993) observes that several exegetes in the twentieth century consider Sūrah as a unity. Recent works by Muslim scholars in Egypt, Iran and Pakistan like ‘Izzat Darwazah (1964), Amīn Aḥsan Īṣlāḥī (1990), Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1991) and several others explore coherence in the Qur‘ān analyzing continuity within and between the Sūrahs. The issue of coherence gained significance partly due to the centrality of the Qur‘ān in modern Muslim thought but also because the main modern criticism of the Qur‘ān focused on its unity and composition. Several Western scholars found its collection, organization and composition incomprehensible. Some, like Weil (1844), Nöldeke (1860), Bell (1939), Blachère (1949), and Welsh (1981) searched coherence in the history of the revelation and suggested rearranging the Sūrahs and verses for that purpose. Some analyzed its language and style in the manner of Biblical literary critical studies and spoke about inconsistency and disunity in the Qur‘ān. Others employed the principles of historical criticism and raised doubts about the historicity of the Qur‘ān. Modern Western scholarship mostly found the Qur‘ān incoherent and repetitive. Unlike Muslims who
believe that it is revealed word of God, almost all non-Muslim Scholars treat it as a human composition.

Michel Cuypers, the author of the book under review is a Catholic Christian, and a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus. He is a disciple of Charles de Foucault. He stayed in Iran twelve years studying Persian literature. Since 1989 as a member of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, Cairo, he has been living in Egypt. He has published several studies of the Qurʾānic text, especially its composition and its inter-textual relationship with other sacred texts.

Michel Cuypers observes that Greek rhetoric received through Romans is generally assumed to be classic and universal in the West. In fact, he argues that this is a modern cultural and ethnocentric presumption. Greek is not the only one classic rhetoric in the world. Biblical rhetoric is essentially Semitic. The Bible was mostly written in Hebrew but also in Aramaic; both literary traditions were entirely different from Greco-Roman rhetoric. The same is true of the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth. Rhetoric of these Arabic texts is closer to that of Bible and thus part of Semitic rhetoric. The Semitic rhetoric is based on some figures of speech like chiasmus, but it is employed to structure the text; it is not merely ornamentation.

Semitic rhetoric is entirely based on the principle of symmetry. Contrary to Western scholars, Semitic composition is quite coherent and very strongly structured. Distinguishing between the Semitic and Greco-Roman rhetoric styles, Roland Meynet observes that while the Greek rhetoric wants to convince its addressees by imposing an unanswerable reasoning the Semitic rhetoric guides the reader to understand the whole message if one wishes to. This is why Greco-Roman rhetoric cannot help understand the coherence in Semitic literature.

According to Cuypers, Muslim tradition was aware of the fact that Arabic rhetorical style differed from the Greek. He mentions that Ibn al-Muʿtazz in 887 defined how the structure in Arab-Muslim texts differed from the Greek rhetoric. A. Schaade translates the title Kitāb al-Bāḍīʿ as a ‘book on modern style’ and observes that modern style meant adopting the new style of the Qurʾān against the ancient rhetoric of metaphors that was simply ornamental. The modern style that focused on effective communication became victorious by the end of the ninth century. To Schaade, it proved that “the figures of speech, whose generous employment appears to have been the most prominent (and hence the most frequently criticized) feature of the modernistic style in the eyes of the public, were without exception traceable in the Holy Book as well as in the classical literature.” (“Balāgha,” The Encyclopedia of Islam, 1979, 1: 981). Although the Arab Islamic tradition
benefited from other rhetoric traditions, including Greek, but in Schaade’s view, “the impulse toward a theory of balāgha, or aesthetic effectiveness on the verbal level, seems to have been germane to the Arab tradition...” (Ibid.)

In order to appreciate the literary style of the Qur'ān and to understand its contents Islamic scholarly tradition began quite early to historicize the verses and Sūrahs of the Qur'ān determining whether they were revealed in Makkah or Madīnah. Discourses about the occasion when a certain verse or Sūrah was revealed and whether some verses of the Qur'ān were abrogated, amended or qualified by later revelations developed into the sciences like Asbāb al-Nuzūl and al-Nāṣikh wa l-Mansūkh. Literary approaches to the study of the Qur'ān focused on two themes: i'jāz (the miraculous or the rhetorical elements) and naẓm (composition, structure). Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashi’s (d. 1391) Al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 1505) Al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān have discussed the history of these sciences. Cuypers has provided a summary of this information in an appendix to his book.

It is pertinent to note that rhetoric studies in Islamic tradition focus on three sciences: ‘ilm al-ma’ānī, dealing with the different kinds of sentences, ‘ilm al-bayān, dealing with the art of expressing oneself eloquently and clearly, and ‘ilm al-badī’, dealing with embellishing speech and defining its modern tropes and techniques. Interest in issues of coherence in the Qur’ān and its rhetorical style grew quite early among the Muslim scholars. The above mentioned Ibn al-Mu’tazz (d. 887) was among the earliest who studied the rhetorical aspects of the Qur’ān. Ibn Qutaybah (d. 889) wrote about the problematic rhetorical vocabulary of the Qur’ān. Abū Bakr Nīshāpūrī (d. 936) was, however, the first to analyze the unity and continuity in the verses and developed a science that he called ‘ilm al-munāsabah. Ḥammād b. Muḥammad al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 996)’s Bayān Ijāz al-Qur’ān addressed the five issues that were part of the discussion in his times: incoherence (intishār), weak composition (sū’ al-ta’līf), ellipses (ḥadīf), repetition (takrār), and lack of order (‘adīn tartīb). Most of the modern objections echo this list of issues already in discussion in the tenth century.

Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1148) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) in their exegesis in twelfth and thirteenth centuries explored further the unity and continuity between the verses. In the fourteenth century Zarkashi explained the continuity, for instance, between Sūrah al-Fāṭihah and Sūrah al-Baqarah pointing to the word ihdīnā used in the prayer for guidance to the right path towards the end of al-Fāṭihah and the same word used in the beginning of Sūrah al-Baqarah with reference to the Qur’ān as book for guidance. He argued that the term “guidance” in Sūrah 1 is explained in Sūrah 2. Abū Ja’far b. al-Zubayr (d. 1308) and Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā‘ī (d. 1480)
also wrote on coherence and aptly chose the following titles for their respective books: *al-Burhān fī Munāsabat Tarṭīb Suwar al-Qur’ān* and *Naẓm al-Durār fī Tanāsib al-‘Āyāt wā’l Suwar*. Al-Suyūṭī in the sixteenth century provided further evidence of the increasing growth of interest in the rhetorical analysis. Obviously these discussions relate more with the Arabic-Islamic rhetoric than the classic Greek rhetoric.

Interest in thematic and structural studies of the Qur’ān in the subcontinent in the fifteenth century is evident in ‘Allāmah Makhdūm Mahā‘īmī’s (d. 1431) *Taḥṣīr al-Raḥmān wā Taysīr al-Mannān*. This approach was developed further in the sixteenth century by the Farāhī School of exegesis who distinguished itself employing the science of rhetoric to discover the system and structure of composition of text in the Qur’ān. According to Amin Aḥsan Islāhī (d. 1997), a disciple of Ḥāmīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930), the arrangement in the Qur’ān is in accordance with the special instructions by the Prophet. Each Sūrah is a complete unit; it has a separate subject and theme that is vertical in structure. All parts of the Sūrah are related with the subject and the themes. The Sūrahs in the Qur’ān are divided into seven groups. Each group begins with one or more Makkah Sūrahs and ends with one or more Madanī Sūrahs. Each group has a vertical comprehensive theme like each Sūrah; each Sūrah has its pair *mathānī* (repeated).

Cuypers explains that unlike Muslim scholarship, Western literary studies have been steadily influenced by late Hellenistic rhetoric. This rhetoric was regarded as the most accomplished science of refined discourse and use of figures (metaphors, metonyms, synonyms, and antithesis). Accordingly even the term and conception of rhetoric in common usage was greatly biased in favour of the Greco-Roman classics. The Western scholars could not do justice to the literary criticism and appreciation of texts that did not belong to that tradition. According to Cuypers, it was in the eighteenth century that Biblical rhetoric was identified as Semitic in the West and by the end of the nineteenth century most Protestant scholars had accepted this view. Revival of general rhetorical studies is noticeable since 1980. It emerged in the wake of structural studies that focused on composition and structure of the text. Catholic scholars in the twentieth century like Marcel Jousse, Albert Vanhoye, Paul Beauchamp, Roland Meynet and Bovati Pietro further developed a method of rhetorical analysis exploring Semitic concept of Symmetry.

The Biblical and Semitic Rhetoric (RBS) established in Rome in 2008, formulated several analytical principles. Nils W. Lund developed seven laws about the symmetrical structure of the text that govern the arrangement of ideas in a composition. According to him chiasmus means a symmetry in which different elements of speech intersect antithetic pairs and alternating
rows appear frequently in a single unit of the composition. In this form of composition centre is the turning point. It is where a change is indicated in the course of thought and often an antithetical idea is introduced. Michel Cuypers applies the rules of rhetorical analysis developed by Nils Lund in Biblical studies. Studying rhetoric of scriptures, Marcel Jousse observed that one cannot overlook the significance of their original oral transmission. The role of memorization in the oral transmission explains the significance of rhymes, binary rhythm, and parallelism. Roland Meynet systematized further this approach to Semitic rhetorical analysis and published several works in this field.

The Semitic rhetoric is based on some figures of speech like parallelism and chiasmus, but it is employed only to structure the text. They are not for ornamentation, but for composing text. Semitic rhetoric is entirely based on the principle of symmetry, which can take several forms, for instance the following “figures of composition.”

(1) Parallelism, when related textual units reappear in the same order (ABC//A'B'C') which itself has two main forms:
   (a) Synonymous, when two similar textual elements are placed in symmetry (i.e. A / / A'; or A B / / A' B'; or A B C / / A' B' C')
   (b) Antithetical, when the symmetry of the elements is set opposed to each other (A ↔ A '; or, A B ↔ A' B'; or, A B C ↔ A' B' C')

(2) Mirror Parallelism, “mirror composition,” chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, when related units reappear in inverted order or when several textual elements are arranged in two-fold inverted symmetrical order (ABC//C'B'A'),

(3) Concentric Composition, or “ring composition,” when a center connects the opposite sides of an inverted parallelism (ABC/X/C'B'A'). Very often, there is a central hinge between the two components of the symmetry. (Either A B C / / x / / C' B' A', or, A B C / / x / / A' B' C'.

These symmetries can be located in the text by signs of composition which correspond with other terms in a mutual relationship of identity (repetition of the same terms), of synonymy (in the broad sense of “terms of nearby sense”), of antithesis, of homonymy (or quasi-homonymy, or assonances), or same grammatical shape.

What makes the Semitic rhetoric particularly subtle and complicated, is the fact that since these different figures of composition exist at various levels of the text, one must carefully distinguish them in the analysis:

(1) The “member” which is the minimal rhetoric unit; it corresponds generally to a syntagm (a brief verse, a proposition);
(2) The “segment” which counts one, two or three members linked together
(3) The “piece” which counts one, two or three segments;
(4) The “part” which counts one, two or three pieces.

On for the four “superior” levels: the “passage,” the “sequence,” the “section” and finally the “book,” each includes one or several units of the previous lower level. As such many combinations are possible. That is semitic what gives rhetoric much flexibility.

The Semitic composition is therefore understood by these indices, which are known by repetition, for instance, in the following ways.

1. Repetition of the same word twice (In Al-Fātiḥah: Allāh, ‘alayhim)
2. Repetition of the synonymous words (Al-Fātiḥah: ṭabb, ṭālik,
3. Repetition of antonyms or antithetical words (Al-Fātiḥah: ḫalīn, ḫalīn, an ‘am ‘alayhim, maghāb ‘alayhim)
4. Repetition of homophones (Al-Fātiḥah: al-Raḥmān, al-Raḥmūn)
5. Assonance, repetition of words resembling in sound between syllables arising from the rhyming of stressed vowels (id-Dīn, ṭa’llīn)

Greco-Latin rhetoric dominated the western literary culture but growing interest in Semitic rhetoric provided Conference of the International Society of the History of Rhetoric (Montreal, 2009) the opportunity to invite scholars to investigate other rhetoric traditions. The Semitic rhetoric drew special attention because it was employed in two major sacred scriptures: the Bible and the Qur’ān. Works on rhetoric analysis by Roland Meynet and his group had also shown the relevance of this rhetoric in the Islamic traditions (ḥadīths).

The Semitic rhetoric allowed scholars to understand why certain books of the Bible (like the Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the prophetic books, etc.) or the Qur’ān appear so disordered, apparently made of independent fragments (laws, narratives, exhortations, oracles, etc.) without clear logical link between them.

The main reason for this is that the Semitic discourse is not based on a principle of continuous and progressive movement as the Greek rhetoric (with its five classic parts of the discourse: introduction, story, confirmation, refutation, and peroration), but on the principle of symmetry.

Michael Cuypers’ Le Festin is part of the above mentioned development in rhetorical studies that extends this approach to the study of the Qur’ān. He is not the first, but most of the earlier studies focused on Makkan short Sūrahs. Le Festin is a study of a long Madanī Sūrah. Agelika Neuwirth and Pierre Crapon studied the structure of the Qur’ānic text and found certain literal unity. Both, however, worked only on Makkan Sūrahs. Neuwirth
(1981) focused on rhythm, rhyme and Crapon (1981) on stylistic elements and recurrence of certain traits. According to Cuypers, "Both [studies] do not provide the true key to the organization of the verses." (p. 15).

More recently Mathias Zahnisar (1997, 2000) and Neal Robinson (2003) dealt with the question of composition of long Madanī Sūrah. Robinson (2001), Viviane Comerro (2001), and Gabriel Said Reynolds (2011) have also studied Sūrah al-Māʾīdah. Apart from interest in the intertextual studies of the Bible and the Qurʾān that is the focus of the last work; the first two focus also on rhetorical analysis, and have especially studied the terms, sentences and proposition that correspond with the recurrence as index in composition. In his work Cuypers has gone deeper into the rhetorical analysis.

Cuypers concludes that contrary to common perceptions this Sūrah is completely coherent. From its smallest element to the whole, the Sūrah corresponds to the laws of Semitic rhetoric. Instead of linear logic it is based on concentric structures. Analysis from that angle helps understand the composition of the text. He also shows linkages with other Semitic scriptures like Deuteronomy and Psalms.

The rhetorical analysis of Sūrah al-Māʾīdah in Le Festin consists of 2 sections and 14 chapters: verses 1–71 in Section one and 72–120 in Section two. According to author's structural analysis the Sūrah is divided into two sections on the basis of the two themes of discourse; the first set of verses calls attention of Muslims, Christian and Jews to the challenge of common alliance and the second set specifically invites Christians to enter into this alliance with Muslims.

Rhetorically, sections are further divided into sequences and subsections; subsections contain interventions under the relevant themes in the discourse in order to enhance the effect and significance of the themes. The author identifies five types of sequences: exhortative, narrative, polemical, legal, and juridical. Juridical relate to the authority of the Prophet in the alliance. The sequences are structured on a linear pattern. Section one consists of all the above mentioned five sequences, and the section two has three sequences: exhortative, polemical and juridical. Chapters in this book are organized according to the sequences and sub-sections.

The following table explains the thematic and rhetorical structure of the discussion in the book.

SECTION A: Verses 1–71, Theme: Challenges of Common Pact

SUB-SECTION A1: Entering into pact in Islam
Sequence A1: [Verses 1–11] fulfilling pact in Islam, exhorting believers about abiding by the bonds of alliance
Sequence A2: [Verses 12–26] Jews and Christians refuse alliance
SUB-SECTION A2: Justice in Islamic polity
Sequence A3: [Verses 27–40] Crime and Punishment for rebels in Banī Isrā’il
Sequence A4: [Verses 41–50] Prophet Muhammad’s juridical authority over Jews and Christians
SUB-SECTION A3:
Sequence A5: [Verses 51–71] Statutes for Muslims and the People of the Book

SECTION B: Verses 72–120, Theme: Invitation to Christians and Jews to join Alliance with Muslims
SUB-SECTION B1:
Sequence B1: [Verses 72–86] Appeal to Christians for conversion
SUB-SECTION B2
Sequence B2: [Verses 87–108] Legal codes for the Community of believers
SUB-SECTION B3
Sequence B3: [Verses 109–120] Declaration of monotheist faith by the apostles and Jesus

Cuypers defines the verse 32 (“Whoever kills a human being who is not guilty of murder or sedition on Earth is considered as if he has killed all mankind. Whoever saves the life of one human being is considered to have saved the lives of all mankind”) as the centre of the Sūrah al-Mā’idah. This verse is located in the middle of the Sequence 4 (verses 27–40) of Section 1. It sets out a fundamental and universal principle and makes the Sequence uniquely significant giving an important perspective to the Sūrah. This is also an important inter-textual context. The verse also exists in Mishna Sanhedrin 4: 5 as a comment on the story of Cain and Abel.

After detailed rhetorical structural analysis of the Sūrah in twelve chapters, the author offers general conclusions in chapters thirteen and fourteen. Chapter thirteen describes the general rhetorical composition of the Sūrah and the chapter fourteen provides a thematic summary. The author has appended a chapter at the end presenting a survey of the discussions on the coherence of the Qur’ān in the history of Muslim exegesis.

The book offers analysis of the Sūrah on two levels, themes and composition. The analysis on the level of composition is not immediately clear. It appears to have been constructed to correspond with the thematic structure. In the light of author’s explanation that Semitic rhetoric is different from the non-Semitic one expects the author to clarify the structure of composition independent of the thematic structure. It is quite obvious from the author’s conclusion about locating the verse 32 as the central verse of the
Sūrah. His thematic explanation and intertextual references in the Bible and the Qur'ān are understandable but from the perspective of composition and also symmetry it is not immediately clear.

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