the increasing marginalization of the traditional modes of life, and the unreserved embrace of European culture and values by the Egyptian elite. Yet, the sweet nostalgia by which Baraka re-constructs images of Cairene exclusive clubs, city quarters, theatres and parliament (which was also a sort of exclusive institution), conceals other vital dimensions of the life and works of the Egyptian upper class. To a certain extent, Baraka efficiently documents what she calls the “serious limitations” of the upper class’s attitudes towards democracy and issues of social reform, including the fear from the spread of education among the peasants, the strong beliefs among the landed stratum of its inherent right to rule, and the slow development of democracy and political participation. What she is obviously reluctant to mention was the sharp disparity between the standards of living of the pashas and the ordinary Egyptian, the brutality and exploitation that characterized the relations between the 0.5 percent and the rest, and the vast gap that separated the cultural milieu of the upper class from the daily life of the vast majority of people.

Today’s Egypt seems to be entering a new phase of social polarization and differentiation. After a short period of socially oriented experiment (which, however badly it is now portrayed, did attempt to establish a more inclusive society), the distance between the wealthy few and the poor many is on the increase. As the nouveau riche embrace the American culture in a demeaning manner, the majority of Egyptians seem to sink deeper and deeper, struggling against decaying urban quarters, dehumanizing public transport and a dysfunctional system of education. If only for this, and despite its shortcomings, Baraka’s book should become necessary reading.


This book is a commentary on the first two sūrah of the Qurʾān. It consists of an introductory note of 33 pages, the explanation of *Sūrah al-Fātihah*

On the situation of the Egyptian peasants during the first half of the twentieth century, see the observations of Russell Pasha in his *Egyptian Service, 1902–1946* (London: John Murray, 1949), 30–42.
(16 pages), and Sūrah al-Baqarah (742 pages), and annexures comprising of 16 pages. The text is divided into sections of varying length, each bearing a single subject which appears along with word by word as well as paraphrased translations. The translation is generally very good and fluent, and is followed by explanatory notes. Thus the reader can easily comprehend the meanings of the text with the aid of the two types of translation.

The author aims at understanding the text with a modern mind and at seeing the Divine Book as encountering the situations we face today. He is of the opinion that the true revival of the ummah is contingent upon the scholars’ effort to build their direct relationship with the Divine Book. “We need Qur’anic education on a grass-roots level....... This book is part of a mission which wants the ummah back to the Qur’an”, he says (p. 24). Keeping his stated mission in view, the learned author has compiled the results of his own efforts at understanding the two sūrabs to serve as a model for other students of the Qur’an.

The learned author has presented the results of his contemplations and reflections in such manner as if he were a teacher instructing his students how to study and analyze, and how to reflect and arrive at right conclusions. In fact he holds his reader’s finger to walk along with him in order to facilitate the latter’s task. Even then the presentation is cumbersome and in the opinion of this reviewer an uninitiated student of the Qur’an will not find it easy to grasp, because it is burdened a bit too much with Arabic words and cross-references.

Every good commentator of the Qur’an formulates certain principles for his study and prescribes procedures to arrive at his conclusions. The learned author, too, has devised elaborate procedures to understand the Qur’an and has faithfully followed them. According to him, every sūrah is a complete discourse and should be understood as such. It is very systematically organized and bears a central theme. It is after gaining an understanding of this central theme that one can appreciate the import of each verse. Since every sūrah is coherent, well knit and systematically organized, the literary context of each verse must be kept in mind, as the neglect of it may cause misunderstanding and may even lead to the distortion of the Divine Message. The author upholds the concepts pioneered by Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1349/1930) and followed by Amin Ahsan Išlāhī (d. 1418/1997) in his commentary titled Tadabbur-i Qur’an. The author acknowledges the valuable work done by these scholars and benefits from their researches in his book.

According to the author the fundamental principles in the understanding of the Qur’an are the following: (i) that the Qur’an should be approached in the right frame of mind and with full conviction that when one reads the
Qur’an one is going to study the Revealed Guidance in Divine Words (RGDW); (ii) that one part of the Qur’an explains another part; and (iii) that there is no triviality in the Qur’an. The author has taken pains to analyze each surah so as to understand its internal structure and to arrive at the central theme around which the surah revolves. He has extensively used the above-mentioned tools to produce an excellent explanation of the surahs selected for the study. He proves his stance by means of numerous cross-references gathered from all over the Qur’an.

Here and there one finds very long notes, each spread over several pages, on some of the themes, such as ‘ibādah, sidq (truthfulness), īslāb, ma’rūf, conflict between Truth and Falsehood, etc. These are self-contained pieces of research. The note on ‘ibādah (8 pages), for example, includes all types of worship, such as ṣalāh (Prayer), dhikr (remembrance), du‘ā (supplication), ṣadaqāt (charities) and zakāh. The note on īslāb is based on the occurrence of this theme in Sūrah al-A’rāf, al-Rūm, al-Nahl, al-Shūrā and al-Hujurāt. Although these notes are valuable as pieces of research, they distract the reader’s attention from the immediate subject under study.

The learned author is of the view that the Qur’an, in its capacity as RGDW, addresses all future situations and, therefore, it is a mistake to think that any situation which the Prophet (peace be on him) or his people faced, occasioned any part of the Divine Book (p. 26). In my opinion, the correct approach is that although the situations faced by the Prophet (peace be on him) and his Companions occasioned the revelation of the Qur’an, the Book being RGDW, addresses those situations for all times to come. The effect of misconception manifests itself when the author does not identify the groups alluded to in Sūrah al-Fāṭiḥah as maghḍūb ‘alayhim and dāllin and those in Sūrah al-Baqarah, verses 8 to 20. Even the three Jewish tribes of Madīnah, who are addressed in al-Baqarah time and again as the Children of Israel, have not been named.

There are references to numerous episodes from the history of the Israelites in Sūrah al-Baqarah but the author refrains from explaining them in the light of the Old Testament, saying that his main interest lies in a conceptual study only. This reviewer thinks that lack of historical details has made the study obscure. The actual perspective of the episodes would have conveyed the message better.

The application of the principles of tafsīr stated by the author has been faulty in some respects or, perhaps, his mind is obsessed by certain notions, when he defines (i) Tawḥīd as a programme to liberate human beings from slavery of each other; (ii) Shirk as lordship of Man over Man leading to mutual exploitation and corruption within human society; (iii) The īmānic movement
of the Prophets as a peaceful campaign against the injustice deeply rooted in
the social system. In fact, what he has described are not *tawhid*, *shirk* or *imānic*
movement themselves, but their effects on the society.

The Qur‘ān states that initially human beings were a single *ummah* but
later they disputed the concept of *tawhid* and became divided into factions.
Then Allah sent the prophets to bring the dissidents back to *tawhid*. This
rationale of the institution of prophethood is clearly stated in the Qur‘ān. The
author puts it in the following words:

In the beginning human beings were one community. There was no internal
conflict, no mutual exploitation (even no distinction between upper/super and
lower/inferior strata of society in spite of differences among the people in power,
prestige, wealth, knowledge, etc.). As one family of the servants of one God, they
were mutually concerned. They shared their resources and had great mutual
respect. They were all trying their best to do their mutual duties as assigned by
the Lord. But slowly *Shirk* crept in and very soon human beings were divided by
the lordship of Man over Man. There was injustice everywhere. The rich, instead
of sharing with the poor, started sucking their blood. Those who had power and
prestige in human society further humiliated the downtrodden and the weak.
Human beings were no longer one family of the fellow servants of their
Lord........... It was at this point that God started sending his messengers and
prophets to make them one community again (pp. 541–542).

The author abhors the concept of abrogation of certain verses of the
Qur‘ān, although it is not something undesirable. It simply means that some
of the commandments were revealed by stages for the convenience of the
believers. He insists that verse 180 of Sūrah al-Baqarah was not abrogated by
the verses 11–12 of Sūrah al-Nisā’. The latter-mentioned verses fixed shares for
the parents while the former called for bequest in their favour. The author is
silent on the issue of reconciling the apparent difference between the two
commandments. Similarly, he holds that verse 184 of Sūrah al-Baqarah
addresses those who are permanently invalidated for fasting and allows them
to feed a poor person for every day that they miss their fast. Thus it is not
abrogated by verse 185. Accordingly, he translates the verse 184 as follows:
“(Observe fasting over) a fixed number of days, but if any of you is ill, or on a
journey, the prescribed number (should be made up) from later days. For
those who can hardly do it is a ransom – the feeding of a poor person – and
whoever does good willingly it is better for him. And it is better for you that
you fast, if only you know”.

The translation of the phrase *yuṭiqūnahu* in this verse as “who can hardly
do it” is questionable because every verb falling in *bāb i fjāl* does not, as a rule,
convey two meanings negating one another. In fact the above meaning is not
proved by the actual linguistic usage among the Arabs. Secondly, if the verse were addressing permanently invalid persons, why did it ask them to do good willingly but it was better for them to fast?

The learned author skips over some of the verses. He has not offered any explanation of \textit{Alif Lam Mim} or the verse 116, which mentions the People of the Book as saying that Allah has taken to Him a son. He states that al-Masjid al-Aqsa was made the \textit{qiblah} for the Muslims after the \textit{Hijrah}. Historically, this is not correct and the Prophet (peace be on him) used to face towards the said mosque while he was in Makkah before the \textit{Hijrah}.

There are numerous mistakes of proofreading. A long paragraph at p. 31 appears twice. The annexures contain important Arabic or hybrid words used as terms (pp. 794–97) and an index of important themes of reflection (pp. 798–808).

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It must be noted from the outset that \textit{Muhammad, the Qur’an and Islam} is unfortunately not a serious academic work. It is driven by a highly partisan agenda and its tone is negative, even condescending in its treatment of traditional Muslims’ claims made for the Qur’an and the Prophet; interestingly enough, he is equally dismissive of some of the more recent Western scholarship on early Islam. For him W. M. Watt is much too even-handed in his treatment of the Qur’an and Muhammad. Although he nowhere acknowledges the point, the author’s orientation is clearly Christian, but it should also be noted that the Christianity in question is of a decidedly narrow sort. His orientation is apparent throughout the work and it colours both his approach and the conclusions to which he arrives.

Newman insists on applying what might be called a source-critical approach to the Qur’an and objects to scholars like W. M. Watt who have argued that in the case of the Qur’an, at least, the question of sources is largely irrelevant to an understanding of the text as it stands. Newman, by contrast,