
Formally educated in Science and Engineering, Khurram Murad (1351–1417/1932–1996) was from his early days desirous of becoming versed in Islamic learning. His desire to enhance his knowledge of Islam not only kept him attached to books written by an array of Islamic scholars, but also made him sit at the feet of a number of scholars from whom he learned Arabic, the key language of the Islamic lore, and the basic wherewithal of Islam. Along with others, the writings of Sayyid Abū 'l-A'lā Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979) and the lessons of Maulānā Āmīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1418/1997) contributed to his deep understanding of the Qur’ān. He takes pride in being a humble student of the school of Qur’ānic exegesis initiated by Maulānā Ḥāmid al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1349/1930), a school that was further developed by Maulānā Iṣlāḥī.¹

To Murad, “the Qur’ān … is the final answer to man’s eternal, existential quest,” (p. 5) which “leads whole people from glory to glory,” (p. 5). As for Muslims, “it is the ultimate arbiter of their destiny...” (p. 5). Hence starting from his student life, Murad always tried to share whatever fragment of the Qur’ān he knew, even if it be one verse. He was, however, both shy and quite disinclined to take credit for whatever insights he had to offer others, taking refuge under his protestation of “gross inadequacies of knowledge and Taqwa” (p. 5). Thanks to many friends of his who always urged him to make his ideas reach the larger public, *Key to al-Baqarah* found its way to the press. It was intended to be the first booklet rather than the last in a series entitled “Treasures of the Qur’ān Series” (p. 5).

“My sole aim,” Murad says, “is to make the message of the Qur’ān, and its summons to live by it, reach the hearts and minds of readers” (p. 6). This booklet, *Key to al-Baqarah* “is not a work of erudite scholarship,” he modestly states. “I am writing about things which I am learning myself, as one wayfarer to another. Hence, the reader will not find here fine points of grammar, lexicon or philosophy, nor rational and philosophical discourses, nor details of Fiqh” (p. 6). However, Considering the large number of issues that Murad deals with, and the maturity of thought that he displays in their resolution in the span of just 36 pages, there is no gainsaying that the author was a bit too modest about himself.

¹ For a detailed account of his life and learning see his autobiography *Lamḥāt*, ed. Salīm Ṭaḥṣīr Khalīd (Lahore: Manshūrāt, 2000).
The author follows the following basic premise: “Nothing in the Qur’an is without reason and purpose” which, in the words of the author, “should form one of the fundamentals of our methodology and approach in understanding the Qur’an” (p. 8). Not only Murad invites reflections upon questions of fundamental nature but also he spells out the etiquettes that one must observe in this endeavour to understand the Qur’an. He counsels the readers that while “We may not be able to answer the question ‘why’ all the time, or discern meaning behind everything, but it is essential to raise the question at every point” (p. 8). In spelling out his methodology to understand the Qur’an, Murad displays a mature scholarly attitude regarding the answers to the questions thus raised. He regards two warnings to be a must, while raising the question ‘why’ at each and every step: “Firstly, whatever understanding we arrive at, it is very important to always take it as only a human understanding, which is liable to be mistaken, and never to assign it a Divine status. Secondly, no answer should be accepted if it conflicts with the continuing consensus in the Ummah or the overall framework of the Qur’an” (p. 8).

The author deals with the basic question of the arrangement of the Qur’an, and concludes that “... the Prophet himself (pbuh) ... under divine direction, arranged the sûras as they are (tawfīqī) [sic]”2 and that “this arrangement is thematic” (p. 8). He further dwells on exploring the reasons why the Qur’an has been arranged in the present order and not chronologically, and concludes that “... though revealed at a particular point in time and space, in a particular locale and among a particular people, the Qur’an is Divine guidance for all times to come and for all people. By completely ignoring its historical order, even losing track of it — much to the chagrin and dismay of many Orientalists — it has been lifted out of its particular historical context in time and space and made timeless. Thus it becomes valid and relevant in all contexts” (p. 9). Were it arranged in its chronological order, “... it would have become merely an ‘event’ in history, it would have lost touch with its timeless character,” he argues (p. 9).

As far as each sûrah is concerned, the author submits, in line with the Farāhī school of Qur’anic exegesis, that: “Every sûrah is a unit. It is an enclosure of messages and meanings, all knit together in a coherent and systematic order, however disparate the contents may look at first glance. Every sûrah has a central theme, around which all its contents are woven” (p. 11). In light of that, he raises the question: “Why ... has al-Baqarah been placed at the very beginning of the Qur’an? Especially when its themes are centred upon the community of the Muslim Ummah and its social life, rather

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2 This is an obvious, typographical error, the correct word being tawqīfī.
than upon the basics of faith which are prior, and therefore are the primary and dominant concern in the first revelations" (p. 8). Murad patiently explains the rationale underlying the *tawqīfī* placement of *al-Baqarah* at the very beginning of the Qurʾān though, chronologically speaking, its verses were revealed much later, at different times during the Madīnan period:

...while the Qurʾān was being revealed, its first addressees were either non-believers, and those who were bent upon denying it, or those who had believed and were being moulded into the desired faith-community (*Ummah Muslimah*). But, after its revelation was completed and the faith-community had been formed, and all denial and opposition — of that time — had come to an end, its first addressee for all times to come was to be the faith-community.... Therefore, at the time of revelation, precedence had to be given to the basic message and articles of faith and to the opposition which the Qurʾān was encountering, as well as to the gigantic task of shaping the *muslim* person and the *muslim* community. But, after its completion, precedence had to be given to faith-community, its purpose, direction, needs and social affairs. (pp. 9–10).

This reasoning is indeed novel, one that is scarcely found in the works of the *mufassirīn* of the past or in the works of modern *mufassirīn*.

Casting a fresh look in keeping with his approach, Murad states that the central theme of *al-Baqarah* is “…the mission of the Muslim Ummah: to state and define it, to exhort, inspire and prepare the Ummah to fulfil it, and to warn and safeguard against any deviation from or abandonment of this mission. This theme is stated in verse 143” (p. 11). While most of the *mufassirīn* are silent on this issue, Sayyid Mawdūdī thinks that “the central theme of *al-Baqarah* is Guidance, as this surah is an invitation to Divine Guidance. As a result, all the stories, incidents, etc., revolve around this central theme.” Significantly, Maulānā Islāhī is of the opinion that the central theme of *al-Baqarah*, is “invitation to belief,” and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1386/1966) views that the central theme of *al-Baqarah*, is two-fold: “First, the attitude of Bānī Isrāʾīl towards the Invitation to Islam …. Second, the Muslim Community, its inception and its nourishment to prepare it to carry the trust of propagation of the message of the Creator and His vicegerency upon Earth.”

Along with the central theme of *al-Baqarah*, the author also brings out certain recurrent themes which, in his view, “interlace the entire discourse and

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constitute its basis and essence” (p. 28). These recurrent themes include the following:

One, though the focus in the surah is on the community, al-Baqarah puts the Qalb – or the ‘heart’, the inner person, the individual – at the centre of its entire discourse. It is the seat, the cause and the end of all strengths and all diseases... The Qalb is ultimately empowered and responsible for accomplishing the mission... (pp. 28–9).

Two, though the surah lays down a large number of rituals and legal injunctions, and demands total and absolute obedience, it repeatedly stresses that what is really desirable and worthy and what finds acceptance with Allah is the spirit and the intrinsic dimensions of the outward and formal, ... legal acts. Consequently it often decries mere outward religiosity and piety hoisted on empty hearts, and lives which are given half-heartedly in surrender to Allah (p. 30).

Three, the surah strongly refutes the commonly-held misconception that merely belonging to an established ‘religion’ or sect will ultimately ensure one’s salvation, irrespective of one’s state of faith and righteousness. It repeatedly declares that merely wearing the label of an established ‘religion’ ... has no value in the eyes of Allah. Thus, ... the only criterion by which Allah will judge and recompense them is by the truth of their faith, by their sincere and total surrender and devotion to Him... (p. 31).

Four, it is made plain in various places and in different ways, that the rise or fall, progress or decadence, strength or weakness, honour or ignominy, that becomes the lot of the Muslim Ummah, depends entirely upon their conduct with respect to the Divine Book and the guidance they are given, and upon how they discharge the mission... (p. 32).

Five, it is both stressed and demonstrated that the path of Islam is an easy path. No demand of the Qur’an or Shari’ah is beyond the power or capacity of man: ‘Allah does not lay a responsibility on anyone beyond his capacity’ (v. 286). ‘Allah desires ease and not hardship for you’ (v. 185). In all injunctions this principle is found to be observed... (p. 33).

Six, while the surah lays down considerable injunctions in almost every sphere of life, very significantly at no place does it specify a punishment for the violation of any of these injunctions. Rather, we notice from the text a quite different approach. While laying down an injunction, everywhere the Qur’an touches the heart, enlivens it and makes it responsible to obey. It fills hearts and minds with a consciousness of Allah... (p. 33).

Seven, the surah throughout lays great stress on developing a strong and cohesive social life. It links the requirements of such a life with the ritual worship (p. 34).
As far as the structure of *al-Baqarah* is concerned, Murad thinks that it may be divided into seven well-defined sections, all with themes of their own and yet interrelated. He adds that these sections may be further sub-divided into sub-sections. However, he does not forget to make a point of clarification that: “Such division is not divinely dictated, but greatly facilitates reflection and understanding” (p. 12). While discussing the themes of these seven sections and sub-sections he puts forward many points of mature understanding and wisdom, a few of which are mentioned below.

The address in the Qur’ān is communal, collective and corporate: ‘*O you who have faith.*’ Murad says: “Indeed, nowhere does the Qur’ān address a person as an individual. It implies that Iman, by its very nature, must give rise to a communal existence” (p. 12). Murad emphasizes the communal aspect of Islam in his comments on verses 153–62, stating that these verses “…point to the key personal resources required to fulfil the covenant. They are personal only in the sense that they can be generated only within a person’s inner self. But all of them assume a communal shape and infuse the communal life deeply. For example, Salah is congregational, so are Fasting, Pilgrimage and Jihad” (pp. 20–21). Towards the close, the author reemphasizes: “Community life is of primary importance: both to provide the proper soil and environment for the growth and strength of personal qualities, as well as for developing collective strength to discharge the Ummah’s mission. Social life must therefore be moulded in Taqwa, as should be the hearts” (p. 23).

The “… guidance for *Muttaqīn*… If this is understood as a necessary prerequisite, then all the characteristics should be taken in their primary, literal meaning, not in full Qur’ānic meaning” he contends (pp. 13–14). He argues: “Otherwise this would mean that to receive guidance one should be already guided” (p. 14). But, in a sense, this meaning is also true, he adds, for “… the scope for developing Taqwa is endless. To proceed from the primary to the advanced and higher stages, one must have some degree of Taqwa” (p. 14). As far as a necessary prerequisite, “in a primary, literal sense, Taqwa should mean the innate faculty to differentiate between right and wrong, and the inner strength to recognize and accept the right as right and the wrong as wrong, and to refrain from doing what one believes to be wrong” he explains (p. 14).

Differing with many *mufassirīn*, including Maulānā Iṣlāḥī, who is of the view “that the address in *al-Baqarah* is directed primarily to the Jews, but at times secondarily it turns to the Prophet (peace be on him), Muslims and Banī Ismā‘īl,” the author is of the opinion that: “The addressee [of *al-Baqarah*] is ... the Ummah. Even where a long section (vv. 40–123) is addressed to Banī Israel

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6 Maulānā Amin Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān*, 1: 76.
(the Children of Israel), the primary purpose is to give the new faith-community a picture of what can go wrong with such a faith-community, what diseases of heart and mind, of morals and manners, of conduct and behaviour, may creep in, which may destroy the very foundation and fabric of the community” (p. 12).

The author further dwells upon the question: Why does a l-Baqarah’s discourse turn to Bani Israel, the Jews of its time, for 84 long verses, about one-third of its length? He acknowledges that: “No doubt there were Jews in Madinah, they had to be invited to Islam, and the Qur’an had to deal with the state they were in and with their behaviour towards the Prophet (pbuh) and his message. So this certainly was one of the ‘occasions’ or reasons for these revelations” (p. 16). Then he contends that: “But this is not sufficient to explain the length, content and context of this discourse” (p. 16). He questions: “Is it because of the Prophet’s (pbuh) disappointment and anger at the Jews’ stubborn refusal to accept him, and their vehement opposition to him, as many Orientalists often contend?” He goes on to state: “there is no textual or historical evidence to support this contention... There is no anger or condemnation here such as we find in the Old and New Testaments. The Prophet (pbuh) went to great lengths to accommodate the Jews...” (p. 16). He concludes that: “The primary purpose does not seem to be to condemn the Jews of the Prophet’s time (pbuh). Rather it is to provide a ‘mirror’ for the Muslims of all times, to hold up to themselves, to see a faithful reflection of their own condition and destiny” (p. 16). The author further adds: “The discourse also delivers judgment upon the Bani Israel because of their failure to discharge their mission, and thus provides the basis to replace them with the new Ummah, the Muslim Ummah, raised under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), to continue Allah’s mission” (p. 16). Moreover, “...in the Qur’an, history is not for history’s sake. Though particular nations have been named, names are mere labels. Their accounts are in fact case studies of communities to show what goes wrong with them and why. From these examples other people should learn lessons” (p. 16–17).

The most important personal resource, Murad says, “is that you remain ever-conscious of Allah, you live in His presence, you see everything as being from Him and because of Him, you remain ever-mindful of meeting Him on the Day of Judgment. In short, you remember Him ... in every situation and every moment” (p. 21). To achieve this state of existence, he states, “The Salah has been prescribed...” (p. 21). The author adds, “...Salah cannot be established and performed without sabr, whether personal or communal” (p. 21). But on the other hand, “it is Salah which generates, develops, supports, reinforces and
sustains the quality of sabr, the quality of resolve, steadfastness and patience” (p. 21). Thus, “Indeed, both are interlinked in a dialectic process” (p. 21).

The concluding three verses, Murad says, summarize “All the essential moral and spiritual resources without which this huge task cannot be fulfilled…” (p. 26). He enlists and explains these essential moral and spiritual resources as below:

*One*, we are trustees, not the owners. Allah is the Owner of everything. Even our lives, bodies, all possessions and relationships, are His - not ours. Keeping this in mind, we find the strength to become His, and to live and behave as we belong only to Him. *Two*, being trustees and not owners, we must use everything in life in accordance with His Will. This gives us the strength to obey Him in everything. *Three*, everything we receive or accomplish in life is from Him and because of Him. This enables us to remain ever thankful to Him. *Four*, this also gives us the patience to face all adversities and tribulations. *Five*, being trustees we will surely be called to account for our deeds and misdeeds in things and matters given in our trust. Even what we conceal in the deepest recesses of our heart we shall have to account for. Thus we always keep our eyes on that Day of Reckoning and Judgment, and prepare for the Hour when we shall stand face to face with Him. *Six*, it is only in His power, and in no one else’s, to forgive our faults and sins or to punish us. This makes us fearless of judgments passed by human beings like ourselves. *Seven*, if that Judgment is the final arbiter of our ultimate fate, then we place all our hopes and fears in Allah alone, and turn only to Him for mercy and forgiveness, whenever we fail the test that we are put to… (pp. 26–27).

Before concluding, a necessary correction seems in place. The author mentions that, “according to al-Wähidi, verse 218 was revealed as late as during the Prophet’s farewell Hajj…” (p. 7). Al-Wähidi, however, writes that “verse 218 was the last to be revealed upon the Prophet (peace be on him), and he lived [only] nine nights after it.”7 Considering the amount of knowledge and deep understanding that this small booklet presents, one can’t help wishing that the author had lived longer to contribute more to this useful and promising series that he had started. But as things are, God’s will always prevails and the author breathed his last in December 1996.

Aburrahman Saaleh

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