Book Reviews


Many scholars of the Qur’ān have come forth with ‘topical arrangement of the Qur’ānic verses.’ Their efforts leave something to be desired in their effectiveness to acquaint the reader with a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the Qur’ānic Message. The need to convey core of the Qur’ānic text led Fazlur Rahman, some three decades ago, to undertake the delineation of the “major themes of the Qur’ān.” As a Muslim scholar he considered himself responsible to fill the gap existing then, by making a synthetic presentation of some of the significant Qur’ānic teachings.¹

The present work by Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Professor of Islamic Studies the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, appeared in 1999 under the title, *Understanding the Qur’ān: Themes and Style*. The author, is widely known for having written extensively in the field of the Qur’ānic studies. In this work, Abdel Haleem aims to explore some important themes of the Qur’ān, viz. water and its symbolism, tolerance, marriage and divorce, war and peace, life and resurrection and the concept of paradise, including numerous others with a focus on their literary, figurative, and rhetorical aspects. The author of this work that Orientalists tend to regard the form and content of the Qur’ān, ‘as nothing more than a jumble of borrowed and rambling thoughts with no sense of direction’ (p. viii). In order to respond to such confusions and to communicate the Divine Message effectively, he presents a blending of thematic, stylistic and comparative approaches which help the reader in a serious study of the Qur’ān.

¹ For more information on the other works on the Qur’ānic themes until 1979, see Fazlur Rahman’s ‘Introduction’ in *Major Themes of the Qur’ān* (Minneapolis, Bibliotheca Islamica: 1980), pp. xi–xvi. It is pertinent to note that in 1978, Jacques Jomier produced another significant work on the “great themes of the Qur’ān” in French, a work that was later translated into English.
The work elucidates numerous themes in the context of the linguistic style of the Qur’ān which do not only help to communicate the Qur’ānic message effectively but also acquaint the readers with the central precepts of Islam. A substantial part of this book throws light on the miraculous style of the Qur’ān.

The author aims at warded off confusion prevailing about the Islamic concept of war, attitude towards women and Polygamy. The author explains that Qur’ānic message rejects both the extremes of celibacy and extra-marital sexual relationship. The work attempts to eradicate the misperceptions the treatment of by providing testimony of the relevant passages from the Qur’ān.

The comparative approach used by the author, acquaints the reader with the corresponding and non-corresponding dimensions of the biblical and Qur’ānic treatment of the different themes. Thus, the author seeks to disprove the claim that the Qur’ān imitates the Christian and Jewish scriptures.

The author presents a very useful comparative analysis of the style of major themes treated by the Qur’ān.

For instance, in numerous contexts the author explains the Qur’ānic use of the past, the present and the future tenses and their interchangeability, the phenomenon is particularly discussed in the sections ‘Life and Beyond’ and ‘Paradise,’ the quick succession of scenes and events and the frequent shifting of the present into the future, thus emphasizing not only the inherent relation of both these perceptions but also point to the ultimate destiny of the life of this world. The study facilitates the translators and commentators by providing an apt explanation of the classical precepts, i.e., context and internal relationships, used for a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the Qur’ānic text.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters. The first chapter, ‘The Qur’ān’ (pp. 1–14) opens with elucidating the significance of knowledge and learning, and describes the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān, its central role in the life of Muslims. The existing translations, despite possessing numerous merits, leave the readers with a hazy and inadequate understanding. Owing to the significance of the style, Abdel Haleem emphasizes that knowledge of the Qur’ānic stylistics is essential for scholarship in this field as the Qur’ān has its own distinctive features which have not been made available to the English readers before. He regrets that though there are numerous books on Arabic grammar which have been translated into English, no parallel book is found on Arabic rhetoric. Arabic commentaries by Zamakhsharī (d. 1143) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), which focus on the ‘rhetorical excellence’ of the Qur’ān ‘have not yet been translated into English’ (p. 9). The author thinks that availability of sufficient material on rhetorical aspects of the Qur’ān to
English-speaking readers, would help clarify a number of confusions (p. 9).

In the second chapter, titled, ‘Al-Fātiha: The Opening of the Qur’ān’ (pp. 15–28), the author throws light on the significance of the opening sūrah of the Qur’ān, in view of its role in prayers and unparalleled rhythmic niceties. The dynamic rhetorical feature, viz. ʾiltīfāt, is found in the text of the sūrah and the shift appears between recounting Lord’s Grace and compassion to the mode of addressing and placing supplications before Him. A part of this chapter is devoted to briefly comparing, ‘The Fātiha and the Lord’s Prayer,’ which brings out the fact that both have different objectives and scope. On this point, Abdel Haleem comes to the conclusion that Fātiha has a wider perspective as it is recited more frequently and bears crucial social implications, unlike the Lord’s Prayer.

Chapter three, ‘Water in the Qur’ān’ (pp. 29–41), speaks about the role of water in the creation and regeneration of the universe and everything contained in it. Water is not only a source of life but also a means of sustaining it on the earth. It serves as a symbol of life, as the coming of the rain water furnishes an apt analogy of the commencement of the resurrection. It makes the point that, in the first instance, all kinds of water, viz., semen, the rain or sea water perform a significant role in conception, restoration, and maintenance of life. Despite these life constituting properties, water also has a destructive nature as appears from the case of Nūḥ’s flood. Moreover, Abdel Haleem comments that the language the Qur’ān employs in speaking of water is lively and full of movement and produces specific effects on the senses. This intensity and richness of the language is further enhanced by the employment of ʾiltīfāt, which is frequently used in the verses about water and involves sudden grammatical shifts.

For recounting the significance of tolerance in chapter 6, Abdel Haleem utilizes the comparative approach as the subject envisages the understanding of both the perceptions at a stretch in chapter four, five and seven. In the chapter titled, ‘Marriage and Divorce’ (pp. 42–58), Abdel Haleem brings to the fore the sanctity of the conjugal relations and mentions certain regulations, thus producing the effects of persuasion and dissuasion, enunciated to maintain a compatible family system. The chapter also discusses the treatment of women in Islam and their privileged position within the family.

In chapter five, ‘War and Peace in the Qur’ān’ (pp. 59–70), the author explains the Qur’ānic injunctions containing stringent rules to commence war. Here, the author discusses the regulations which prohibit commencement of certain actions and those which ask to stop doing certain actions under specific conditions. The author emphasizes the importance of keeping in mind and strictly observing this regulation in the event of legally justified war. A part of
this chapter is devoted to drawing the readers’ attention to strategic devices and elegant demeanour supported with the Qur’ānic verses, viz. cessation of hostilities, treaties, prisoners of war, resumption of peaceful relations, humanitarian intervention, and International Co-operation, to maintain amicable and friendly relations with other nations.

Chapter seven, ‘Life and Beyond’ (pp. 82–92), discusses very important aspects of human life and acknowledges that the present life and the life hereafter are interrelated and their interplay should not be lost sight of. He presents numerous passages from the Qur’ān to show that both the concepts i.e., life and beyond, not only manifest themselves simultaneously by reinforcing their indispensable relationship but also appear with different terminologies in different places, viz. ‘al-ūlá and al-ākhira and al-dunyā and al-ākhira’ (p. 82). The two seminal sections of this indicator, viz. ‘Life and Beyond’ and ‘paradise’ recurrently depict action and performance and the change of tense from the present to the future which indicates a strong association between the transient and the eternal.

The Qur’ān is particularly pictographic in representation of its different themes and meanings and clarifies abstract concepts through figurative language to drive home their lessons. In this context, chapter eight, ‘Paradise in the Qur’ān’ (pp. 93–106), exhibits the concept of paradise and inculcates its idea through very figurative expression, scenes and events which stir the imagination and appeal directly to the senses. The Qur’ān enchants the human senses by portraying the reward of the believers through those concepts with which they are already acquainted and which they can easily comprehend.

Anthropomorphic use of language presents the concept of God in order to highlight His reality in a concrete, vivid, and most compelling way and to dispel uncertainty and doubt of every kind in the mind of the reader. In this regard, chapter nine, ‘The face Divine, and Human, in the Qur’ān’ (pp. 107–122), exhibits a polemical debate between scholars and probing into the true manifestations of the Divine face and Human face alternatively. Linguistically, ‘the face of God,’ is a figurative use of language and metonymically refers to God’s Grace and Glory. The application of different attributes to God, for instance, mercy, knowledge, speech and hearing, etc., are taken to be a symbol of His Majesty and Omnipotence. On the contrary, the idea of human face reinforces the point that the good and evil deeds of the believers and disbelievers alternatively reflect from their faces and mirror them accordingly in this world and in the life beyond. The description of colours, mood, and impressions of different shapes, images, scenes and events at once invoke visual imagery and induce readers’ imagination to contemplate on them.

In a similar vein, the chapter ten, ‘Adam and Eve in the Qur’ān and the
Bible’ (pp. 123–137), recounts the Qur’anic narratives of Adam, with ideas, dialogue and swift change of successive scenes pointing to the main thread of the story. In this narrative, the whole section elucidates the Qur’anic and Biblical accounts of the story separately, their different approaches, the quantity and type of information they provide and the high objectives of the story in their respective linguistic and social contexts. The text aptly portrays the creation of Adam, Eve and the human race, their sin in Paradise, the conviction with ensuing nakedness, and finally their descent with perpetual and eternal enmity between the Satan and the human beings. The discussion highlights the status and power relations between men and women, the concept of God and moral standing of human beings in this world and in the life hereafter.

In chapter eleven, ‘The Story of Joseph in the Qur’ân and the Bible’ (pp. 138–157), the author attempts to identify different functions, tone, tenor and mood of the two distinctive narratives in their respective context(s) and co-text(s). The constant knocking and probing into the texts reveal that the main events of the story and their simultaneous effects are the same in both the versions but the function, tone, time span, characterization and artistic forms are different. The comparative and contrastive frames, employed by the scholar, are an effective strategic device to stimulate the receptor’s reflection, which highlight its abstract, concrete and figurative perspectives as well as vertical (revelation from God to man) and horizontal (its dissemination throughout the world) dimensions and evolve meaningful understanding of the narrative. Here it seems appropriate to say that the prime concerns of these narratives are to attain the edifying objectives and inculcate spiritual emancipation of the reader by communicating its universal message in dramatic and sensuous manner.

In chapter twelve, ‘The Qur’ân Explains Itself: The Sûrat al-Rahmân’ (pp. 158–183), the author discusses two instrumental precepts of tâlîgha, i.e., context and internal relationships, specifically formulated by Muslim scholars for the interpretation and understanding of the Qur’anic text. In view of their significance, it is pertinent to note that the translations/commentaries bereft of these principles always construct erroneous assumptions, produce inadequate explanations or arrive at wrong conclusions. Owing to its significance, Muslim scholars emphasize the need to understand the socio-cultural context of the revelation because the latter is associated with certain events and understanding of the context provide additional meanings or connotational perspectives and inculcates a reflective comprehension of the Qur’anic text. Similarly, the concept of “internal relationships” parallels “intertextuality” which has been formulated to understand and interpret the
Qur’anic text. The concept reinforces the idea that some parts of the Qur’anic
text clarify, strengthen and reinforce the meanings of other parts.

Chapter thirteen, titled ‘Dynamic Style’ (pp. 184–210), throws light on
one of the stylistic aspects of the Qur’ân and emphatically clarifies that what
has been assumed by the Orientalists to be bad grammar is in fact a well-
established and effective feature of the Arabic literary writing. This aspect
aims to provide to the receptors’ freshness and variety of expression and keep
them away from boredom and frustration. Nöldeke, a staunch critic of the
Qur’ân, commented that the grammatical person frequently changed in the
Qur’ân in an awful and unpleasant way of talking. Apparently such comments
indicate casual study and lack of knowledge of the Arabic style of the Qur’ân
whereas the Muslim scholars declared this aspect to be a miraculous and a
captivating feature of the Qur’ân. Al-Zarkashi defines the phenomenon as:
‘the change of speech from one mode to another, for the sake of freshness and
variety for the listener, to renew his interest, and to keep his mind from
boredom and frustration, through having the one mode continuously at his
ear’ (pp. 186–187). This remarkable stylistic feature of the Holy Qur’ân
increases the intensity and richness of the Qur’anic language. The sole
objective it aims to achieve is to penetrate the universal Message not only into
the heart of the readers but into the entire fabric of his being by stimulating
their contemplation through a variety of expressions and ultimately guide
them to spiritual emancipation.

In sum this work is a timely and wonderful contribution to an
understanding of the content and style of the Qur’ân in different linguistic and
non-linguistic contexts. It probes into the prevalent problems and craftily
addresses the issue to help avoid the doubts and confusions hovering in the
minds of many. It is a welcome contribution to the field of thematic and
stylistic studies of the Qur’ân.

This work promotes critical self-reflection and inner emancipation from
frozen, skeptical and ideational patterns and help us reconstructs a sense of
awareness of the Qur’anic text. It illuminates us immensely thematic, stylistic,
and rhetorical manifestations of the Qur’anic text.

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2 Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Understanding the Qur’ân: Themes and Style (I.B Tauris, London,
New York: 1999), pp. 186–187. In order to satisfy the spurious rumours and confusions, Abdel
Haleem took pain to explain the Arabic style of the Qur’ân. He explains at length by quoting
numerous erudite scholars. In his view, the large number of such articulations is due to the lack
of understanding and casual study of the non-Muslim western readers. At one occasion, he
endeavours to facilitate them by enumerating numerous dimensions of the Dynamic Arabic
style of the Qur’ân.