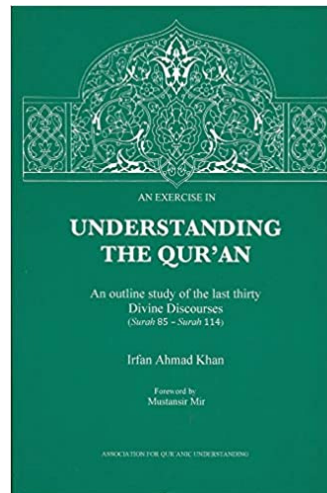


Book Reviews

Irfan Ahmad Khan. *An Exercise in Understanding the Qur'an: An Outline Study of the Last Thirty Divine Discourses (Surah 85–Surah 114)*. Chicago: The Association for Qur'anic Understanding, 2013. Pp. viii+213. Paperback. ISBN 978-1567447736. Price: US\$ 19.95.

An Exercise in Understanding the Qur'an: An Outline Study of the Last Thirty Divine Discourses (Surah 85–Surah 114) is a 2013-2nd revised edition of the book by Irfan Ahmad Khan (d.2018). Though Khan is an important Qur'anic scholar who is also well versed in modern Western philosophy, particularly analytical philosophy, event ontology, and Continental philosophy, he is not widely known in academic circles. This review critically introduces a relatively older but an important Khan's work about the methodology of understanding the Qur'ān. The methodology requires attention of contemporary Qur'anic scholars as it is systematic, coherent, and comprehensive. The book is structured as a workbook instead of a theoretical or philosophical discussion of theories behind the method. Further, the solved exercises are not meant to teach Khan's personal understandings of the last thirty *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān. Rather, Khan sees himself as a mathematics teacher who solves a few problems to explain the method of solving certain mathematical problems. The purpose of such teaching is to develop skills and capabilities in the students to solve problems on their own. Through this approach, the book aims to teach Qur'anic students how to understand the Qur'ān with their own minds and hopes that they may excel their teacher in understanding the Qur'ān.



Khan's methodology of understanding the Qur'ān can be summed up in his comprehensive statement, "The act of understanding a text by someone involves striving to develop an insight into its meanings through building one's own direct relationship with its verbal content. In the present case this text [the Qur'ān] is a linguistic expression in the Arabic language" (p. 1). Khan's methodology is directly opposed to another methodology where readers try to understand the understanding of another person instead of understanding Qur'ānic verbal content (e.g., understanding the *tafsīr* of an exegete). Once the *tafsīr* is understood, readers believe that they have understood the Qur'ān, when in reality they only understood a secondary text. According to Khan, such students have not even tried to understand the Qur'ān. To him, developing a personal relationship with the verbal content of the Qur'ān is equivalent to God's personally communicating with the readers in the particularity of their lives. He believes no one can communicate the way God communicates. In a nutshell, Khan through his methodology wants that interpreters and commentators do not "remain standing between God and God's servants" (p. viii). Khan is not against getting external help to better understand the Qur'ān. His point is that when we get such help we should not "focus away" from the divine text.

A significant portion of Khan's methodology of understanding the Qur'ān is based on Farāhī school of Qur'ānic understanding. The school's main insight is that the Qur'ān is an organized book in its sequence of compilation. Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930) sees a thematic and structural coherence (*naẓm*) in the Qur'ān. According to him, *naẓm* is the most important and decisive indicator of the *direction* of Qur'ānic meaning. This means for Khan that the current readers should read the Qur'ān in its sequence of compilation, and abandon their efforts to read the Qur'ān in the sequence of revelation unless they are involved in the historical study of the Qur'ān. Reading in the sequence of revelation breaks the inherent structure and coherence of the Qur'ānic text. Khan sees each *sūrah* of the Qur'ān as a complete discourse where all themes of the *sūrah* are integrally connected. Thus, according to Khan, the Qur'ān is understood *sūrah* by *sūrah*, whereas each *sūrah* is understood *āyah* by *āyah*. An *āyah* is the smallest unit of meaning. It is a sign that requires our attention to reflect upon it and recognize it. For Khan, *āyah*-consciousness is a necessary condition to properly understand the *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān. Therefore, readers who exert *their minds* to discover the underline thematic structures can be said to have understood the *sūrah*. Following Farāhī, Khan also believes that adjacent *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān—

called *sūrah* groups—also have structural and thematic unities. Finally, *naẓm* exists in the *sūrah* groups and the whole Qur’ān. As readers continue reading and discovering thematic unities in each *sūrah*, among the *sūrahs*, and the whole Qur’ān, they get deeper insights underlying the Qur’ānic text. It is for these reasons Khan considers understanding the Qur’ān a lifelong continuous process and not a onetime epiphany.

Though Khan firmly believes in the concept of *naẓm* as described above, critique of Farāhī’s concept of *naẓm* equally applies to Khan. According to the critique, *naẓm* seems to be forced on certain places in the Qur’ān where it does not exist. Mustansir Mir positively points out this criticism in the foreword of the book by suggesting that Khan’s “observations” of *naẓm* are “suggestive” but they are “informational” and “provide a useful synoptic view of the thematic relationships making an important segment of the Qur’ānic text” (p. vii). Khan would disagree with this assessment, as he believes that not finding *naẓm* at certain places in the Qur’ān only means that the reader has not reflected deep enough.

The book consists of thirty-four chapters. Four chapters introduce Khan’s basic insights. Chapter one is a short introduction to “Understanding the Qur’an;” chapter two explains “Qasam or Swearing in the Qur’an;” chapter three introduces “Important Qur’anic Terms and Concepts;” and chapter thirty-four provides a synoptic view, “An Overall Look” on the structural and thematic organization of the last thirty *sūrahs*. The rest of thirty chapters consist of solved examples of one *sūrah* each per chapter. The book also provides a foreword, preface, glossary, and very short Index. All these elements implicitly help to understand the thirty solved examples of the book.

A significant shortcoming of the book is that it does not provide descriptive explanation of Khan’s method of understanding the Qur’ān. It only demonstrates the method through its application to each *sūrah*. Though it is not impossible to learn the methodology in this way, it is unlikely that most readers may be successful. Just like learning mathematical problems from a textbook requires a teacher to orally explain the method while solving the mathematical problems, the book either requires a descriptive written explanation of the method or a teacher who knows the methodology. To overcome this shortcoming, an initial attempt to describe the methodology is made in a PhD dissertation, “Understanding and Qur’ānic Revelation: The Dynamic Hermeneutics of Irfan A. Khan” (2016), by the present reviewer. Chapter three of the book, however, can be considered a slight exception from this shortcoming. In this chapter while learning about important

Qur'ānic terms and concepts as seen by Khan, we can interpret how Khan derives their meaning in the light of the last thirty *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān. For example, Khan develops the meaning of 'abd-Rabb (Servant-Lord) relationship through sequentially reading the *sūrahs* in the order of Qur'ānic compilation. Among the thirty *sūrahs*, the first encounter of this term happens in *Sūrat al-Bayyinah* which points to two main characteristics of an 'abd: *mukhlis* and *hanif*. *Mukhlis* means for Khan through the interpretation of the *sūrah* "“being sincere (or being *mukhlis*) in the Religion' or 'purifying the religion'” meaning “being 'abd (servant) only of God' or 'having God alone as one's Lord (*Rabb*)”” (p. 21). Stated negatively it means, “When one fails to do so, one is committing *shirk*,” that is “one is associating partners with God—giving some-one-else status of a god (*ilāh*)” (p. 21). Therefore, a true “believer in One God does not mix up impurities in Man-God relationship” (p. 22). The second character of an 'abd is to be *hanif*, a person “with undivided loyalty” to God. The next reference to 'abd-Rabb relationship occurs in *Sūrat Quraysh* where the Quraysh are told that they have decided to be *mushrik* (idol worshipers). The Prophet and his companions have decided to worship one God alone. The two positions are radically different. Therefore, there can be no compromise on this point. However, both parties are reminded that they must tolerate each other and are free to practice what they believe as true. The key point in Khan's methodology seems to be that he develops the meaning of a term as he encounters it in its local literary context and then among the *sūrahs* as they occur in the sequence of the compilation of the Qur'ān to form one integrated and holistic conception of the term.

There are Qur'ānic and philosophical underpinnings to Khan's methodology that are at the base of his method. Without knowing those underpinnings, one may question or may not understand the reasons behind the methodology. Despite these shortcomings, the book is an important contribution to understand the Qur'ān. It requires intelligent readers who are willing to spend time and effort to understand the method behind the exercises. Only then the importance of the book is revealed to the reader.

Tanveer Azmat*

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* Lecturer, Department of Humanities, Wilbur Wright College, N. Narragansett, Chicago, IL, USA.