The Qur'ānic *Sūrah* as an Autonomous Unit of Analysis: Sūrat al-Baqarah as a Case Study

ELTIGANI ABDELGADIR HAMID[*]

Abstract

This paper aims to discern the central integrating theme(s) of Sūrat al-Baqarah. Within any Qur'ānic sūrah*, there are, assumingly, some organizing themes around which single verses revolve. Disconnected from these organizing themes, the meanings of single verses can be obscured. To test this hypothesis, the paper uses Sūrat al-Baqarah, which is the longest* sūrah *in the Qur'ān, as a case study. After revisiting some existing interpretive entries employed by scholars of Qur'ānic studies; namely, the* sūrah's *name, its opening verses, and its closing ones, we have deduced two more entries, and have, consequently, developed a new interpretive model. Applying this model to Sūrat al-Baqarah has proved to be a useful method for detecting its major themes, as well as its overall structure. We have concluded that there is a strong connection between the name of Sūrat al-Baqarah, its opening verses, and its concluding remarks and that these three are greatly augmented by the other two entries we have added. We have also found that all these entries converge on two central ideas: concealing and/or revealing the truth. A careful analysis of these two concepts helps to discern the primer objective of the* sūrah *and its internal structure and, hence, enables us to have a better understanding of why some ideas and episodes are included in this* sūrah *while others are not.*

Keywords

Introduction

Over the centuries, many Muslim scholars have been preoccupied with interpreting the Qur'ān. Most of them, however, used to follow a sequential method (i.e., following the Qur'ānic verses and *sūrah*s, one by one). In this way, the "Qur'ānic verse" has normally become the unit of analysis, and the task of the Qur'ānic interpreter has remained limited to linguistic clarifications, occasions of the revelation, Prophetic traditions, and interpretations by the Companions.[1] Though useful at some levels,

---

[*] Professor, Ibn Khaldon Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar.

[1] There are of course some exceptions like al-Rāzī, al-Nīsābūrī, al-Biqāʿī, al-Farāhī, and Ibn ʿĀshūr to name a few.

this method might obscure the overarching worldview that the Qur'ān provides. Some scholars, especially those with rationalistic tendencies or reform projects, have noticed its shortcomings and begun to look for possible universal Qur'ānic principles. To achieve this, they had to explore the entire Qur'ān, which became their unit of analysis. In their view, the Qur'ān stands as a single sentence,[2] where a scholar could freely move through the entire text, extract the overall principles across the sūrahs, and then revert to its particular verses and organizes them under those general principles so that the overall Qur'ānic vision becomes clearer.

In this paper, we would like to stay within the boundaries of the sūrah, thus deriving a middle way between these two groups. We agree with the universalists to the extent that we seek, like them, to grasp the general meanings. However, we disagree with them when it comes to choosing an appropriate unit of analysis. Unlike them, we confine ourselves to a single sūrah, as our unit of analysis. We assume that there is a central "idea" that Sūrat al-Baqarah conveys, and it could be discovered if appropriate entries are employed—as will be shown later. Therefore, our main focus will be on the central ideas and major axes of the sūrah, rather than on the axes of the Qur'ān—as the universalists do.

But making such a choice would ultimately prompt the following question: If we take the sūrah as a unit of analysis, would that yield significant and different results when compared with other methods? What are the specific methodological steps that we would follow in analysing the sūrah? To what extent the analysis of Sūrat al-Baqarah will provide a result that confirms and/or refutes the aforementioned hypothesis?

To answer these questions, we have organized the paper into the following sections: the contextual setting of Sūrat al-Baqarah; the literature review; and a proposed new approach to the analysis of Sūrat al-Baqarah.

The Contextual Setting of Sūrat al-Baqarah

Most commentators agree that Sūrat al-Baqarah was one of the earliest sūrahs revealed at Medina in the first year of the hijrah. In addition to dozens of rulings, admonitions, and ritual and moral guidelines, the sūrah includes the very last verses revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad

---

[2] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1430/2000), 1:384, comments on 2:30.

(peace be on him) before his death.[3] This indicates that the revelation of the entire verses of the *sūrah* took about ten years. These were the crucial formative years in the history of Islam. Hence, a summary of the context of this *sūrah* might be needed, as well as a glance at the main actors and/or events referred to therein.

At the outset, it should be remembered that the *hijrah* itself was not a normal journey from one city to another. Rather, it was a forced expulsion that the Prophet Muḥammad managed to turn to his advantage. Allying himself with the chiefs of two formidable Medinan tribes (Aws and Khazraj), the Prophet and his few followers transformed themselves from a persecuted and hunted religious minority into a formidable politico-religious group with a prophetic leadership, fighting capability, and a privileged geographical location.

On the other hand, Medina (formerly Yathrib), where the fleeing Muslims were apparently welcomed, was a multi-tribal, troubled city. It was inhabited by at least five distinct communities—three Jewish and two Arab tribes. The latter group was not a single homogeneous entity: it included immigrant Muslims who were driven out of their homes; Arab Muslims (Anṣār) who provided shelter, and Arab residents of Medina who neither embraced Islam nor abandoned their previous affiliations with the Jewish communities.[4]

In terms of power, the Jewish tribes had a greater status and influence in Medina. Moreover, these Jewish groups had a strong religious tradition nurtured by renowned religious figures, which allowed them to project themselves as the descendants of prophets who ought not to be compared with their Bedouin neighbours—Aws and Khazraj—who, allegedly, had no sacred book nor had they specific religious cult, apart from an obscure affiliation with the message of Abraham and Ishmael (peace be on them).

Bracing for an expected external attack, the Prophet was not in a position to engage in any religious or racial infighting in Medina, let alone a military confrontation. To maintain peace and order, he adopted two specific strategies: applying a policy of fraternity (*muwākhāh*) between his own followers (Muhājirūn and Anṣār) as well as applying another policy of non-aggression between Muslims and the Jewish

[3] Reportedly, the verse (2:281) was revealed only nine nights before the death of the Prophet. See Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (Doha: Wizārat al-Awqāf, 2013), 4:421. However, other verses are also reported as being the last revealed ones. See Muḥammad b. Bahādur al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2007), 122.

[4] See Yūsuf b. ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Durar fī Ikhtiṣār al-Maghāzī wa ʾl-Siyar* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1991), 93.

communities, which came to be known as (*muwāda'ah*).[5] According to these arrangements, all the Medinan communities began to adapt themselves—some of them grudgingly—to the new politico-religious situation. These were the in-coming Muslim immigrants, who were driven out of their homes and robbed of their money; the Medina-based Muslim Anṣār, who pledged support and protection; a few elements of Jewish and Christian scholars who accepted Islam (i.e., 'Abd Allāh b. Salām and his associates);[6] the group of Aws and Khazraj, who pretended to be Muslims but turned to be hypocrites; and the group of Jews, who initially signed a peace treaty with the Prophet but turned into total hostility. All these groups are briefly referred to at the beginning of Sūrat al-Baqarah.

Given this admixture of communities, cultures, and religious beliefs, it remains to ask how the new Muslims locate themselves in such an atmosphere, and what orienting principles will the *sūrah* provide. On the other hand, it must be noticed that the emigration to Medina was not the end of the troubles between the Muslims and their staunch Quraish tribal leaders. Sporadic military skirmishes between the two groups erupted—within two years after *hijrah*—into bloody military confrontations. These were the years in which long passages of Sūrat al-Baqarah were revealed. But whether the *sūrah* will take up these incidents or leave them out is an issue that represents an important part of our argument in this paper. This will be fully examined later in the article.

Literature Review

To the students of the Qur'ān, the organization of the entire Qur'ānic text into chapters, sub-chapters and verses is not a point of disputation. What is in dispute, however, is the idea behind such *sūrah*-based arrangements and, before that, what is exactly the meaning and function of the *sūrah*s?

Some commentators raised this question a long time ago. Does the "*sūrah*" resemble a wall which encloses a city?[7] Or is it called so because it encompasses all types of arts, sciences, and benefits? Or is it called so, as a reference to the rank of honour, because the *sūrah*s are like stages

---

[5] The text and context of that agreement was reported in various Islamic sources, particularly by Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī. For a precise presentation, see ibid., 142.

[6] Many commentators agree that the verse (2:4) was revealed in relation to 'Abd Allāh b. Salām. See al-Qurṭub, *al-Jāmi' li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 1:275.

[7] Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-'Abīkān, 1998), 1:218-19.

and ranks through which the reciter ascends? Moreover, the *sūrah*s themselves are arranged into long, middle and short.[8]

Reflecting on these questions, Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143) gave several possible answers, one of which is that the Qur'ān is divided into separate *sūrah*s to motivate its reader. In his view, a reciter of the Qur'ān who reaches the end of a chapter and pauses to pick up another one will be more energized and motivated by these inter-chapter pauses than the one who is engaged in a continuous, non-stop reading of the book.[9]

Several decades later, Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) returned to the same issue, not to argue against the conclusions arrived at by al-Zamakhsharī, but to elaborate on them and add some other possible explanations. Referring to the verse (2:23), which reads, "And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a *sūrah* like thereunto," he believes that this verse shows clearly that the Qur'ān was revealed in this very *sūrah*-based form, which is why it is qualified to stand as a challenge, both in terms of its *sūrah*s or its entirety.[10]

But despite this focus on the division of the Qur'ānic text into *sūrah*s, and that each *sūrah* contains limited verses, neither al-Zamakhsharī nor al-Rāzī has consciously attempted to treat the *sūrah* as his "unit of analysis." Like many commentators, they followed the usual sequential method. This is of course the same method that Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) had previously followed, and a group of commentators followed in his footsteps. Describing this methodology, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (d. 1997), a prominent editor of and commentator on al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, says,

> Abū Ja'far (may Allah be pleased with him) never overlooked this interconnection between the meanings of the Book, whether it concerns the verses of rulings, the verses of stories, or other texts of this book. He picks the meaning at the beginning of the verse and then proceeds with it, word by word and letter by letter, then continues sentence by sentence, not leaving anything of it or exceeding the meaning indicated by its context.[11]

But if we follow this method, how can we understand the "universal meanings" of the Qur'ān, or any text for that matter? Does

---

[8] Ibid., 1:219.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 1:348, comments on 2:23.

[11] Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.), 4:537n1.

understanding the parts of a text not require an understanding of the overall meanings of the entire text? Or does this make us spin in an endless circle? To get out of this situation, some scholars believe that a text analyst may start from where he wants, for he will ultimately end up modifying his understanding of the parts according to whatever overarching principles he comes across in the text.[12] Be that as it may, we start with those Qur'ānic commentators who advocate an overarching or holistic approach.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Holistic Approach

Looking for the exponents of the holistic approach, we shall start with Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), who adopted it intentionally. Analysing the Qur'ānic texts, he began by taking a closer look into the entire Qur'ānic material as manifested in his *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* (The Jewels of the Qur'ān). Through this process, he managed to identify what he considers the "supreme purpose" and the pure core of the Qur'ān. It consists of three primary divisions and three that follow them, and all of them, he contends, converge on calling the servants to Allah. Then he took two other methodological steps. In the first one, he introduced a kind of "journey metaphor" that consists of six distinct categories: 1) Allah who kindly invites His servants to Him; 2) the straight way leading to Him; 3) the means of provisioning the way; 4) those who gratefully answer the call; 5) those who ungratefully reject the call; and 6) the conditions of the invitees at the end of the journey. In the second step, he classified the entire Qur'ānic verses into these six categories, organizing the jewels of the Qur'ān into one column, the pearls into another, and so on. Finally, he proceeded to show how the entire verses of the Qur'ān fit into these six categories. Here, al-Ghazālī shows a great ability not only in analysing the Qur'ānic texts but also in observing the subtle internal interconnections between the universal Qur'ānic principles and the particular individual verses; between the realm of the seen and the unseen; and between the devotional obligations and the optional actions—together with the enormous sciences and knowledge which these things entail.[13]

While we appreciate al-Ghazālī's methodology and seek to take the lead from it, we would not, however, attempt to survey the entire

---

[12] Nisrīn Shākir Ḥakīm, "al-Dā'irah al-Ta'wīliyyah wa 'Amaliyyat al-Fahm: al-Harmanūṭīqā al-Falsafiyyah Numūdhajan," *al-Dalīl* 6, no. 21 (2023): 117.

[13] Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān wa Duraruh* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1983), 9-18. It should be noted that many other scholars have somehow been influenced by al-Ghazālī's method, for instance, Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) in his *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Qur'ānic text—as he did. Instead, we shall confine ourselves to one *sūrah* (i.e., al-Baqarah) and attempt like him to determine the "supreme purpose" of that *sūrah*. It should be noted that this approach has continued to re-emerge in numerous scholarly works all over the Islamic world—slightly at some times and strongly at others. To review all or most of these works is not possible nor advisable. For the sake of our main argument in this paper, suffice it to refer briefly to a few outstanding scholars in this field, namely, Muḥammad b. Bahādur al-Zarkashī (d. 1392 CE), 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Farāhī (d. 1930), and Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Darāz (d. 1958). What distinguishes these three scholars and makes us examine their works is that each of them chooses the "*sūrah*," implicitly or explicitly, as a unit of analysis.

Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī

In his *"al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān,"* al-Zarkashī devoted a small section to exploring the secrets of the matching of the opening verses of a *sūrah* with its closing verses.[14] As a point of demonstration, he called upon his readers to reflect on Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ (Q. 28). This *sūrah* begins, he says, with a reference to the story of Moses, his emigration, his repentance, and his solemn vow: "My Lord, because of the blessings You have bestowed upon me, I shall never support those who do evil."[15] In this story, Moses emigrated in humbleness but by the grace of Allah, he finally returned home, triumphantly. In the concluding verses, the *sūrah* turned to Prophet Muḥammed, who was sad at heart because he, like Moses, had been expelled forcefully from home. The verses conveyed to him the promise of return: "He who has made the Qur'an binding on you (Prophet) will bring you back home."[16] This promise of return was accompanied, it should be noted, by the instruction: "So give no help to the disbelievers,"[17] which is the exact instruction Moses had received."[18] The idea that al-Zarkashī is trying to drive home is that there is a strong alignment between the opening and closing verses of the *sūrah*.

In addition to that, al-Zarkashī began to consider the "name" of the *sūrah*. Noting the multiplicity of names of the *sūrah*s and whether these names were revealed or not, he presented a short but very important idea that we shall examine more fully in the course of this paper. He

---

[14] Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, 108.

[15] Qur'ān 28:17. All translations of the Qur'ānic text used in this paper are taken from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[16] Qur'ān 28:85.

[17] Ibid., 28:87.

[18] Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, 186.

says, "One should look into why a *sūrah* takes this or that specific name. There is no doubt that in the process of naming things, the Arabs used to take into account rare features or some surprising or particular sign that belongs to these things. They call a part of speech or a long poem by what is most famous in it. Accordingly, the naming of the Qur'ānic *sūrah*s followed the same pattern. Sūrat al-Baqarah, for instance, has taken this name because of the story of the cow mentioned therein."[19]

Surprisingly, al-Zarkashī did not go further to realize, for instance, that this matching between the opening verses of the *sūrah*, its closing verses, and the *sūrah*'s name might serve altogether as an indicator of the "central" theme around which the axes of the whole *sūrah* revolve.

Works of Contemporary Scholars

Keeping an eye on this multi-entrance approach, both al-Farāhī and Darāz focused on the opening and closing verses of the *sūrah*. But unlike al-Zarkashī, both of them took a further step and consciously used the *sūrah* as a unit of analysis. In his *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, al-Farāhī is explicitly using the *sūrah* as a unit of analysis. In his view, the *sūrah*—whether long or short—is a separate and coherent entity. Moreover, each *sūrah* has a main pillar (*'amūd*) around which all other parts revolve. By way of demonstrating this idea, he left a seminal though unfinished commentary, which has been adopted and developed by Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997), one of his prominent students.

Three years after al-Farāhī's death, Darāz published his *al-Naba' al-ʿAẓīm*[20] to present a new "plan" where the Qur'ānic text is allowed to speak for itself. He intended to follow the trends of ideas, concepts, and arguments that the text provides, without imposing anything from outside. His main argument was that an honest and in-depth analysis of the texts of the Qur'ān itself is quite sufficient to show its miraculous characteristics. What concerns us, however, and is directly related to this paper, is his analysis of Sūrat al-Baqarah. Following his suggested "plan," he presented a detailed analysis that differs methodologically from previous traditional interpretations. To re-emphasize the unitary form of Sūrat al-Baqarah, he urges his readers—in the same way al-Zarkashī did—to notice how the five opening verses of Sūrat al-Baqarah align with the closing ones and how the two sides of this *sūrah* embrace

---

[19] Ibid., 156. It is worth noting that al-Biqāʿī has also stressed the same idea (i.e., the name of each *sūrah* is a translation of its aim). See Ibrāhīm b. ʿUmar al-Biqāʿī, *Maṣāʿid al-Naẓar li 'l-Ishrāf ʿalā Maqāṣid al-Suwar* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 1978), 1:209.

[20] Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh Darāz, *al-Naba' al-ʿAẓīm: Naẓarāt Jadīdah fī 'l-Qur'ān*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Dakhākhnī (Riyadh: Dār Ṭaybah, 2000).

each other—as if to form a tight wall around the verses—so it is really a *sūrah*.[21] In addition to the works of al-Farāhī, Darāz, and Iṣlāḥī—important as they are—there are of course a host of other contemporary interpreters of the Qur'ān like, Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), Abū 'l-A'lā Mawdūdī (d. 1972), and Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr (d. 1973), who focus intensively on the structure of the Qur'ānic *sūrah*s.

However, recognizing al-Farāhī and Darāz does not mean that their works are identical or that we are confined to what they achieved. Indeed, both al-Farāhī and Darāz focus explicitly on the structure of the *sūrah*, divide it into distinct sections, and work diligently to discover the linkages that make the *sūrah* a coherent body. According to Darāz, the sections of the *sūrah* work together like the organs in a living body to fulfil a specific objective.[22] However, he hastens to remind the reader not to concern himself with detecting the connections between verses before grasping the overall objective of the *sūrah*.[23] Following a careful linguistic and logical analysis, he has managed to identify four major objectives that Sūrat al-Baqarah conveys: 1) calling the people to Islam; 2) calling the people of the Book to leave aside their false beliefs and embrace Islam; 3) exposing the Islamic rulings; and 4) expounding the religious motive that drives the believer to adopt and comply with these rulings.[24]

Similarly, al-Farāhī believes that Sūrat al-Baqarah is a well-interrelated body of verses that follow, like all other *sūrah*s, a certain order (*niẓām*), which leads to the overall objective of the *sūrah*s (*'amūd*). In his analysis, he divides Sūrat al-Baqarah into several sections, each of them consisting of several verses that convey a separate theme. But how to systematically relate these several themes to a single primary *'amūd*, as al-Farāhī has claimed, is quite disputable. He started by assuming that the fulfilment of Allah's promise to Prophet Abraham is indeed the master pillar (*'amūd*) of Sūrat al-Baqarah,[25] and, accordingly, he began to look out for verses that confirm this assumption. Describing how he came up with his methodology, here is what he says,

> I hastened to reflect on God's Book and the wealth of its meanings, leaving aside the statements of the people [e.g., commentators]. In the beginning, I used to cast my sight on clusters of verses, when (suddenly) the thread of its order shined on its upper horizon, like the white thread of the dawn,

---

[21] Ibid., 262.

[22] Ibid., 140.

[23] Ibid., 143.

[24] Ibid., 148.

[25] 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Farāhī, *Niẓām al-Qur'ān wa Ta'wīl al-Furqān bi 'l-Furqān*, ed. 'Ubayd Allāh al-Farāhī (Tunisia: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2012), 68.

then it increased in brightness so much so that it removed the veil from my heart . . ., hence I saw my way.[26]

Leaving aside this type of al-Farāhī's subjectivity, one can neither ignore his vigorous analysis and illuminating insights. On the other hand, his failure to set up a clear method that others can follow to discern the *'amūd* of the *sūrah*, is noticeable. This is exactly what prompts me to propose in this paper an alternative set of procedures that can lead to the recognition of the central theme (themes) of the *sūrah.* They will be spelt out in the following sections.

New Approaches of Analysis

The purpose of this section is to discuss the explanatory model we are trying to develop. Starting from where al-Ghazālī and al-Zarkashī left off, we shall elaborate on the three procedural entries which they emphasized: the *sūrah*'s name, its opening verses, and its closing verses. Two other entries of our own, namely, the "inclusion and exclusion" and the "queries of the believers" will be added. We will assume that these five key entries will lead to the major themes that the *sūrah* addresses. By pinpointing this core, we shall then look at how the "sub-issues" diverge, and this will probably guide us to the overall "structure" within which the parts of the *sūrah* are organized. Now we move to a discussion of those "five key entries" and how they could be, as a set of procedures, applied to Sūrat al-Baqarah.

The Name of the Sūrah

The name of this *sūrah* is directly related to the episode of the cow (*Baqarah*), which is presented towards the middle of the *sūrah* (2:67-72). In these verses, Prophet Moses (peace be on him) related to his followers, the Israelites, that Allah commanded them to slaughter a cow. They were reluctant and kept asking questions about the specifics of the cow. Moses responded patiently to their queries, and they, grudgingly, slaughtered the cow. So, what is the significance of this story, and why has it become the name of the entire *sūrah*? Does it in any way indicate the *sūrah*'s main theme?

Reflecting on this issue, most commentators agree on the following facts: a) a murder crime was committed in an area between two Jewish neighbourhoods; b) each group denied any involvement in the crime and kept accusing the other; c) Moses conveyed to them Allah's command to sacrifice a heifer, but they were reluctant and unwilling—asking repeatedly about minute features of the cow; d) when they finally

---

complied with the divine instructions, Moses ordered them to strike the dead man with a part of the cow. The result was that Allah brought the dead man to life who then told them of his killer.[27]

Hence, what is the lesson of the cow episode? According to some commentators, the whole idea is to highlight the intransigent behaviour of rival Israelite groups and to condemn their unceasing questions about the details of the details. In this view, the major theme of the story is to stress the procrastination of the Israelite groups and how they seek to evade Allah's commands. While this argument appears to be acceptable, it should be noted that there is nothing in the Qur'ānic text itself that suggests any negative response or disapproval of the Israelites' repeated questions. Remarkably, Moses responded to their questions with grace and kindness.[28] Moreover, the prevailing tone all over the *sūrah* conveys a spirit of quiet calculations and great attention to minute details, as evidenced by long passages detailing the rituals of *ḥajj*, breastfeeding, divorce, menstruation, integrating the orphans, writing and witnessing the debt, the types of witnesses, the conditions of creditors, and a host of other subtle details spread all over the *sūrah*. A *sūrah* that stands out as a repertoire of detailed procedures, would not be expected to frown on those who seek to understand the details of their assignment, particularly if that assignment was a God-ordained one.

In light of this argument, we should not, therefore, be distracted by the Israelites' pursuance of "details" and lose sight of other possibilities. If we go back to the verses and examine them carefully, we will notice that the closing sentence in the story highlights the Israelites' act of "hiding the evidence." It reads, "When you (Israelites) killed someone and started to blame one another—although God was to bring what you had concealed to light" (*mā kuntum taktumūn*).[29] Obviously, the blame here is not directed to the repetition of questions. Rather, it is directed primarily to their act of hiding the secret and the refusal to provide the needed evidence. In other words, what is blameworthy is the "concealment" (*kitmān*) of the truth, the shameful cover-up of the crime, the moral inability to "testify," and the consequent failure to stand up for justice.

In line with this argument, we can say with fair confidence that the story of the cow is a story of a group within the Israelite community who

---

[27] According to Muhammad Asad, the incident was not reported in the Israelite sources and, hence, he presents a different interpretation of cow episode. See Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), 16.

[28] Some commentators thought that God had stressed the Israelites because they stressed themselves unnecessarily. A Prophetic tradition has been evoked to support this view, but it proved to be unauthentic. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, 2:205n1.

[29] Qur'ān 2:72.

"concealed" the truth, and were completely unable to carry out the duty of "witnessing." Whether these failures were rooted in extreme ethnicity, weakened religious and moral commitment, or mere self-interest is not clear. But whatever the case might have been, a collective hiding of evidence and an evasion of responsibility are the central meanings around which the story revolves.[30] Consequently, it could be concluded that the *sūrah* was named "al-Baqarah/the Cow" because some of the *sūrah*'s most important objectives will be to "reveal" the truth that has been "concealed," that is, to bring forth the hidden things (*yubayyin*). Making things plain entails laying out the foundations of justice and highlighting the procedures by way of which it could be enacted. At the top of these procedures come the provision of evidence and bearing witness.

Understandably, "making things plain" and revealing the truth is not confined to the episode of the cow. They stretch far beyond that to include other types of denial of truth—particularly the denial of the Qur'ān—whether performed by the Israelite rabbis or the Arab polytheists. In this regard, the *sūrah* sets out to explain plenty of things that had been—due to selfish envy, competition, or sheer ignorance—denied or concealed. The ultimate goal of the *sūrah* may be to establish the foundations of justice, and provide the necessary details and procedures that lead to it—foremost of which is the "testimony" and the characteristics of the "testimony-upholding community" (*shuhadā' ʿalā 'l-nās*).

In our view, there is a distinction between the story of the cow and the other stories of death and resurrection mentioned elsewhere in the *sūrah*. In the episode of the cow, the Israelite groups were not asking Moses about how Allah resurrected the dead. Rather, they were struggling to disassociate themselves from a murder crime committed in their neighbourhood. Those who committed the crime and those who knew something about it were evasive for fear that Moses—and his peculiar demand of the cow—might expose their secrecy. To confirm this opinion, the closing verses in the story did not reject their questions but denounced their hidden plot and collective complicity.

---

[30] In his *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, al-Ṭabarī cited a large number of accounts to determine the nature of the crime and to identify the perpetrators. In some of these accounts, the crime is attributed to one or two persons, not to a whole neighbourhood or a clan. This, however, is not quite in line with the Qur'ānic text which implies a kind of a collective participation in the crime as well as collective accusations and denials. To make sense of these accounts, it could be suggested that not all members of the neighbourhood were directly involved in the crime but instead of finding out the truth, they had leaned towards the killers' narrative and provided them with protection.

Accordingly, it can fairly be concluded that the great crime committed by this group is their shameful concealment of the truth, the cover-up of their crime, the moral inability to bear witness, and the consequent obstruction of justice. The lesson to be learnt from this is that bearing witness and telling the truth preserve human life, in contrast to the concealment of testimony that leads to its destruction. This is one of the *āyāt* (signs) of God with which the episode of the cow is closed. The Israelites as well as others are called upon to learn.

The Opening Verses of the Sūrah

We have so far seen that a close examination of the name of Sūrat al-Baqarah leads to the identification of a possible major theme of the *sūrah*; namely, hiding and/or revealing evidence, obstructing and/or upholding justice. If this is true, we may find a hint to that effect in the introduction of the *sūrah.* It is customary in Arabic usage that a competent speaker begins his speech with what interests him most—a skill referred to as the "ingenuity of the introduction." Since the Qur'ān follows the same custom, do we find in this *sūrah* a connection between its opening verses and the theme that we have extracted? In other words, do the opening verses of the *sūrah* correspond to the concepts of concealing and/or revealing truth?

The *sūrah* begins with the abbreviated letters (*Alif/Lām/Mīm*), which will not be discussed here due to the unceasing controversy over their meanings. Let us, then, examine the next verses:

> This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, who believe in the unseen, keep up the prayer, and give out of what We have provided for them; those who believe in the revelation sent down to you (Muhammad), and in what was sent before you.[31]

The concept of guidance (*hudā*) says it all. It is a Book of guidance, that is, its function is to guide people by showing them good and evil, right and wrong, and virtue and vice. Then the verses proceed to classify people into three categories according to their positions on the revealed Book: 1) those who believe in the Qur'ān; 2) those who believe in the Qur'ān as well as in the previous books; and 3) the denialists who do not believe in any book. Thus, we note that the issue with which the *sūrah* begins is the issue of the close relationship between the last book revealed to Muḥammad, and the books revealed before him, and whether the addressees (Jews and Arabs of Medina) acknowledge or deny its divine source. So, it seems we are encountering once more the same concepts of concealing the testimony and hiding the truth, which

---

[31] Qur'ān 2:2-4.

makes us expect that one of the purposes of this *surah* is to expose the positions of the followers of previous books, retrieve the origins of their religious practices, and to show what they have kept secret.

Furthermore, the concept of the exposition of the truth (*bayān*) is repeated in the verses (2:38-39), which represent, in our view, the concluding remarks of the introductory section of the *surah*. The verse (2:38) reads, "We said, 'Get out all of you! But when guidance comes from Me, as it certainly will, there will be no fear for those who follow My guidance nor will they grieve.'"

If so, then these verses represent a general rule, which could be restated as follows: God has blessed all humans with guidance *(hudā)* and with all necessary signs and evidence that indicate his monotheism. Those who follow the signs will be rewarded, while the other who disregard or distort them will face the consequences of their actions. A member in this group is usually referred to in the Qur'ān as *kāfir*, a word that means "to cover" (i.e., to ignore knowingly).[32] In classic Arabic, the "night" is called *kāfir* because it covers everything with its blackness; a farmer is called *kāfir* because he covers the seeds.[33] Since this act of covering and concealing manifests itself in different ways, and since it has been emphasized in the opening verses of the *surah* as well as in its name, it should not be a surprise if it appears to be among the major themes of the *surah*. But to confirm this view, we have next to consider the closing verses of the *surah*.

The Closing Verses of the Sūrah

As explained above, the name of the *surah* and its opening verses stress the same idea of revealing the truth. Would it be possible then to see the same concept re-emerging in the closing verses of the *surah*? We can pick, for instance, the passage which comes towards the end of the *surah*.[34] In this very long verse (probably the longest in the *surah*), an exposition of the process of *mudāyanah* (contracting a debt) is presented in great detail. In addition to providing the legal requirements about the two parties engaged in a contract, it goes on to spell out the duties of the scribe, the guardian, and the witnesses—either two men or a man and two women—and that no scribe or a witness should suffer harm. Noticeably, the crux of this verse turns upon the notion of preserving justice by way of documentation, bearing witness, and showing

---

[32] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 119.

[33] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 1:180.

[34] Qur'ān 2:282-84.

evidence. In the next verse, the believers are instructed: "Do not conceal evidence" (*lā taktumū 'l-shahādah*).[35] The third verse in this passage reminds the believers that following the formalities of contracts without a sincere intention is immoral and that "whether you reveal or conceal your thoughts, God will call you to account for them."[36] Thus, the emphasis on the concepts of concealing and/or revealing can hardly be missed, which confirms unmistakably that the opening and closing verses of the *sūrah* align neatly with its central themes; an idea that will be checked further in the next sections.

The Queries of the Faithful

In contrast to the Israelites' cow-centred questions, the *sūrah* also includes the following set of questions posed by the Muslims: 1) "(Prophet), if My servants ask about Me;"[37] 2) "They ask you (Prophet) about crescent moons;"[38] 3) "They ask you (Prophet) what they should give;"[39] 4) "They ask you (Prophet) about fighting in the sacred month;"[40] 5) "They ask you (Prophet) about intoxicants and gambling;"[41] 6) "They ask you (Prophet) again what they should give;"[42] 7) "They ask you (Prophet) about (the property of) orphans;"[43] 8) "They ask you (Prophet) about menstruation."[44]

We saw in the preceding section that the Israelites' questions were meant to conceal a crime. In the case of the Muslims, they had nothing to conceal. Yet, since they were rooted in the pre-Islamic Arabian traditions and engaged in some Jewish practices and transactions, they were asking for clarifications. They needed to know what was Islamic and what was not. Stated differently, the Muslims were looking for an exposition *(bayān)* whereby they could adjust their behaviour to the new Islamic standards. Hence, their questions were either related to their pre-Islamic heritage or the new pressures forced on them by opposite cultures and religions they came across in the post-emigration period at Medina. Questions about wine consumption, gambling, fighting in the sacred months, and mixing with or excluding orphans are but examples

---

[35] Ibid., 2:283.

[36] Ibid., 2:285.

[37] Ibid., 2:186.

[38] Ibid., 2:189.

[39] Ibid., 2:215.

[40] Ibid., 2:217.

[41] Ibid., 2:219.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 2:220.

[44] Ibid., 2:222.

of the issues that the *sūrah* addresses in detail—notwithstanding their sensitive nature. Emigrating to Medina and mixing with multiple communities therein, the Meccan Muslims discovered differences in cultural habits; either between them and the Medinan Muslims, or between them and the Jewish community in Medina.[45] They asked the Prophet and a set of Qur'ānic verses were revealed in response to their questions.

But addressing these issues, it should be noted, is quite in line with the *sūrah*'s core theme, as well as its opening and closing verses—all of which turn into the concept of revealing the truth, making clear, and expounding the tenets of an Islamic society based on the Islamic faith.

Inclusion and Exclusion

By inclusion-exclusion, we mean that the organization and the location of the verses in the *sūrah* proceed according to a pre-designed plan. Through a process of de-contextualization, a part of a story or an issue is selected and submerged into the mainstream of the *sūrah*, while other parts are excluded. Excluding these parts does not mean that they are unimportant; it only means that they do not fit in this particular location (or *maqām*). We have seen that the organization of passages in Sūrat al-Baqarah (and perhaps in other *sūrah*s) follows this pattern, where a part of a topic is left out intentionally. This type of authorship—referred to by al-Zarkashī before[46]—is necessary for the unity and coherence of the *sūrah*, without which the *sūrah* would not have had a boundary or limits, and it would not have a structure. It is closely related to the art of "grammatical shift" *(iltifāt)*." The rhetoricians paid great attention to this issue which is a mode of speech where the speaker alternates between pronouns, flipping the conversion rather abruptly from a second person to a third or vice versa. To explain the function of this mode of expression, al-Zamakhsharī thinks that it is needed to draw the attention of the listener and energize him.[47] In his view, the departure from one category to another opens the ears to listen, and the souls to accept."[48]

---

[45] M. A. S. Abdel Haleem has presented a thorough discussion of this issue. See M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, "Euphemism in the Qur'an: A Case Study of Marital Relations as Depicted in Q. 2:222-3," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13, no. 1 (2011): 126.

[46] Al-Zarkashī refers to this as *iqtiṭāʿ* and *iktifāʾ*, by which he generally means that a part of the meaning is intentionally dropped from the text because it has already been mentioned (or will be mentioned) in other locations. See al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, 551-52.

[47] Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:120.

[48] Ibid.

It is this shift from one category to another and the turning to another group of addressees that concerns us here. We note that the Qur'ān often uses this method as a means to address a story within the story and to dispose of the historical material in a way that ignores the chronological order. As an illustration, the story of the Israelites in this *sūrah* is not presented in its entirety, then followed by episodes of the believers and the hypocrites, as one might expect. What we have is a part of the story of the Israelites, a turn to the Prophet, or the believers, or the angels, and then a return to the Israelites once more. All this material is presented in one continuous passage where characters, voices, and times overlap but remains oriented towards one of the central ideas that the *sūrah* works to clarify and reinforce.[49]

In light of the above, we can say that this *sūrah* provides an indirect indexing of the rest of the *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān, that is, it mentions a part of an issue or part of a story, and then leaves out the other parts of the story either because it has been separated in a previous context or because it will be detailed in a later context, or because it will be assigned a *sūrah* of its own. The following are the topics fragments of which are mentioned in this *sūrah* and then special *sūrah*s are devoted to them: 1) The believers, polytheists and hypocrites are mentioned, collectively, at the beginning of the *sūrah*, and then a separate *sūrah* is assigned to each group, which are Q. 23, Q. 109, and Q. 63; 2) The *ḥajj* rituals are mentioned briefly, then a separate *sūrah* (Q. 23) is devoted to them; 3) Fighting in the holy month is mentioned briefly but lengthy commentaries on the military confrontations (Badr and Uḥud) have been transferred to other *sūrah*s (Q. 3, Q. 8, and Q. 9); 4). The story of Abraham is mentioned in (2:124-34) and then a special *sūrah* (Q. 14) was devoted to him; 5) The story of Jacob and his sons is mentioned briefly and then a whole *sūrah* (Q. 12) is devoted to them; 6) Jesus is mentioned briefly and then whole sections in other *sūrah*s (Q. 3 and Q. 5) are dedicated to him; 7) Rulings about the divorce process are briefly mentioned and then a whole *sūrah* (Q. 65) is devoted to them.

Looking into this process of selection, one would wonder if there is any organizing thread that makes sense of these overlapping pieces. Are they associated, for instance, with the recurring pair of "concealing and revealing" (*kitmān/bayān*) that we have considered to be the central

---

[49] Ibn 'Āshūr has noted this Qur'ānic style while commenting on the verse (2:159). The main focus in this verse, he says, as well as a number of previous verses, is to expose those who conceal the truth. Without losing sight of this idea, the passage gives a brief reference to some relevant sub-issues, then turns back to elaborate on the main idea. For his comments on 2:159, see Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa 'l-Tanwīr* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyyah li 'l-Nashr, 2007), 2:65.

theme in the *sūrah*? Undoubtedly, this is the case in the seven aforementioned examples. They are directly related to the concept of concealing something or revealing it. The *sūrah* consists of several parts, each part has a close connection with one of the axes, and each axis addresses the issue of concealing and clarification. The larger excluded topics are transferred to other *sūrah*s because if they were allowed to accumulate, the *sūrah* would eventually lose its basic structure and distinctive personality. To illustrate this, we need to consider three examples.

The Excluded Military Confrontations

As explained above, this *sūrah* was revealed in an atmosphere of war and the Muslims who were reciting it were either directly engaged in some fights—under the leadership of the Prophet himself—or heading towards one. Reading the *sūrah*, one would expect to come across lengthy comments on these battles. Yet, the *sūrah* does not delve into any details about military confrontations—except for only four verses (2:191-94) which were in response to a direct question posed by the believers. How, then, can we explain such an omission?

One possible answer is that all references to military events, concurrent with the revelation of the *sūrah*, have been omitted because they belong to different sets of issues, and, hence, they have been transferred to their most appropriate locations in other *sūrah*s. If this is truly the case, then we may make the following tentative inference: This *sūrah* consists of a coherent body of items that form its identity. To preserve its identity, a deliberate act of selection is followed where only items that align with the *sūrah*'s major themes—revealing and/or concealing the truth—are admitted.

To illustrate this point, we need to look into the items that the *sūrah* deems important and give them priority over the excluded ones. Sifting through the *sūrah*, one can readily notice that it consists of two broad parts, each part includes several sections. In part one, the *sūrah* unveils the deep layers of the Israelites' socio-religious history. It reminds them as well as the Muslim community of their ancient sufferings, persecutions, exodus, internal fights, and decline in the post-exodus era.

In the second part, the *sūrah* lays the foundational and regulative rulings for an emerging Muslim community, reminding them of the ups and downs of the Israelites and urging them not to follow in their footsteps. In this regard, the *sūrah*'s main focus is not on the military front but rather on the fields of thought, morality, religious history, family relations, and culture—areas no less dangerous than military battles. In its entirety, the *sūrah* focuses on "exposing" the deep moral

foundations that may be obscured by military battles—whether in external battles against the polytheists of the Quraysh or internal battles against the rabbis of the Jews who use the heritage of previous prophecies to deny the message of Islam and the hypocrites of the Aws and Khazraj who challenged the leadership of the Prophet and lurked in circles with Muslims. Based on this, we notice that the first hundred verses of the *sūrah* are devoted to talking about the claims and beliefs of the rabbis of the Jews and their hypocritical allies.

It is interesting to note that the *sūrah* pays a lot of attention to the bases of disagreement with the others, mainly the polytheist adversaries as well as the People of the Book. But highlighting doctrinal disagreements with the others has a salient purpose, that is, to lay out, by way of contrast, the moral values and social rules on which the new Islamic model would be based. It is understandable, therefore, that the *sūrah* is short in describing the external processes of demolitions (e.g., the military confrontations) but long in explaining the internal processes of construction (e.g., establishing the new ethical and legal system). These internal processes, whether cultural, social or legal, were intended to help the new Muslims to disengage themselves from prevailing Arab and Jewish cultural traditions, and to gradually adopt the new Islamic model. This new model, it should be remembered, is not based socially on blood bonds, military alliances, or raids nor is it legally and economically driven by tribal customs of usury and robberies. That is probably why the *sūrah* includes long passages that focus on "clarifying" these issues. It emphasizes the concepts of human sanctity, justice, and equal rights; it calls for the inclusion of orphans, slaves, and wayfarers; it addresses injustices pertaining to marital relations and commercial transactions; and it ties up all these issues with an unshakable belief in the Unseen. Crisscrossing the *sūrah*, one can easily notice the interplay between ideas and actions, where an actor poses questions and the Qur'ānic text provides concepts and rulings that frame and direct human actions.

The Controversy over the Abrahamic Linage

The story of Abraham is presented in this *sūrah* in a coherent long passage which consists of seventeen verses (2:124-41). What is noteworthy in this passage is that no mention of his birth, intellectual reflections, earlier conflict with his family and community, or expulsion from his homeland, is made. Instead, the focus of the passage is on Allah's promise to make him a "leader of men" (*imām*). Abraham then requested the same for his offspring, but he was told that Allah's covenant does not embrace the evildoers. Moreover, the passage draws attention to the engagement of Abraham and his son Ishmael in the

construction of the Ka'bah, and their heartfelt prayer: "Our Lord, make a messenger of their own rise up from among them, to recite Your revelations to them, teach them the Scripture and wisdom."[50]

To be sure, this Abrahamic-Ishmaelite joint prayer epitomizes one of the crucial issues presented in this *sūrah*. Contextually speaking, two groups were quarrelling over who were the true Abraham's descendants; the Arab polytheists (who used to define themselves as Abraham's descendants, inhabitants of his sanctuary, and the servants of his Ka'bah), and the Jewish communities who believed to be second to none in their ethnic and religious association with Abraham, their Father. Although the two groups denied the message of Muḥammad, the Jews went even further; they denied that there was a reference to Mohammed's message in their books. The Qur'ān rejects vehemently this claim and accuses them of overlaying the truth with falsehood and suppressing the truth knowingly.[51] This charge of "concealing" or "suppressing the truth" is a direct Qur'ānic reference to their disregard or deliberately false interpretation of the words of Moses in the Biblical passages, which reads, "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken"[52]

It is also stated, and the words attributed to God Himself: "I will raise them up a prophet from among the brethren." The "brethren" of the children of Israel are obviously, says one commentator, the Arabs, and particularly the *musta'ribah* (Arabized) group among them, which traces its descent to Ishmael and Abraham. Since it is to this group that the Arabian Prophet's own tribe, the Quraysh belonged, the above Biblical passage must be taken as referring to his advent."[53]

Rejecting the Jews' and Christians' claims, the Qur'ān emphasizes the cardinal principle of Islam, which is the belief in one universal God and calls upon Muslims to stick to it.

> They say: become Jews or Christians, and you will be rightly guided. Say (Prophet), "No, (ours is) the religion of Abraham, the upright, who did not worship any god besides God." So (you believers), say, "We believe in God and in what was sent down to us and was sent down to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus, and all

---

[50] Qur'ān 2:129.

[51] Ibid., 2:42.

[52] Deuteronomy 18:15.

[53] Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*, 10-11.

the Prophets by their Lord: we make no distinction between any of them: and we devote ourselves to Him."[54]

The story of Abraham is located in this place after a long argument with the Israelites to show them the roots of the connection between Abraham and Muḥammad. The verses here are also addressed to the Arab polytheists who were affiliated with Ishmael and Abraham and were proud to have built the Ka'bah, their greatest temple, but who nevertheless denied the prophecy of Muḥammad. The verses also call upon Muslims to play their role in history as a middle-most community, which bear witness and stand up for justice.

This part of Ibrahim's story is, therefore, placed in this place in Sūrat al-Baqarah because it is fully consistent with the concept of "concealing the truth" that has become a central concept in this *sūrah*. Just as the Israelites suppressed the "material evidence," they suppressed, in the same fashion, some "historical facts," especially those relating to the prophethood of Muḥammad and the religion of Abraham and the relationship between them. The Arabs, on the other hand, contended that the Qur'ān could not be of divine origin, though they knew fairly well that the Qur'ān is not a man-made piece of work.

Conclusion

We have attempted in this paper to show that a *sūrah*-based analysis of the Qur'ānic text can lead to a comparatively deeper understanding of the text. To test this assumption, we have chosen Sūrat al-Baqarah as our case study. To specify the *sūrah*'s core concepts, we re-examined three interpretive approaches developed by renowned scholars in the field of Qur'ānic studies: the name of the *sūrah*, its opening verses, and its closing remarks.

Applying these three entries to the *sūrah*, we have identified two core principles that the *sūrah* probably aims to convey, that is, concealing and/or revealing the truth. Reflecting on this, we began to assess whether these two major concepts represent a basic "axis" of the *sūrah*. If so, then it is also probable that the *sūrah* deliberately incorporates any item which is closely related to this axis (of truth revealing or concealing) and excludes all other remote items. This probability has prompted us to do a careful re-reading of the entire *sūrah*. What struck us in this process is that the stories of the three prominent Prophets (Abraham, Moses, and Jesus) are presented in truncated forms.[55] This raises the following question: On what basis only

---

[54] Qur'ān 2:136.

[55] References to Moses are made in this *sūrah* about twelve times (verses 51 to 248), but there is no mention—directly or indirectly—of the many other events in his life. However, we know that these events are presented in great detail in other *sūrah*s, especially Q. 20, Q. 22, and Q. 27, which proves the point that the inclusion of parts of

certain parts of these stories are included in the *sūrah*, whereas other parts—not less important—are excluded? In our opinion, the answer is that the process of inclusion and exclusion is governed by the dominant concepts of concealing and revealing, which we have come across in the opening and closing verses of the *sūrah*. Thus, the process of "inclusion-exclusion" has understandably become the fourth entry in our scheme of interpretation.

Similarly, we paused to examine another peculiar feature of this *sūrah*: the inclusion of several questions posed by the community of the faithful. Is it also probable that these questions are somehow related to the same major theme of "revealing and/or concealing" the truth? After a careful examination, we realized that these questions were raised by a group of new believers who were embroiled in a multi-religious milieu and, hence, were looking for guidance.

Sūrat al-Baqarah is a long text, including a stream of rulings, rituals, and transactional requirements, but the underlying theme is quite discernible. The one divine and universal Message of Islam conveyed to mankind through successive prophets has been either concealed, misunderstood, misinterpreted, corrupted, or abandoned altogether by a multitude of "truth-denialists." Far from being an alien script, the Qur'ān is a revitalizing summation of these Messages, and Muḥammed is an apostle from God "confirming the truth already in their possession" but "some of those who had received the Scripture before threw the Book of God over their shoulders as if they had no knowledge."[56] Hence, the main focus of Sūrat al-Baqarah is to debunk, on the one hand, the claims of the "truth denialists" and to enlighten and guide the truth seekers, on the other. The processes of debunking the false claims and revealing the truth, the *sūrah* proceeds to simultaneously lay the foundations for an emerging *umatan wasatan*, that is, a middle-most Muslim community that bears witness to the truth before all mankind (*shuhadā' 'alā 'l-nās*) and stands up for justice.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Moses' story in this *sūrah* is quite in line with a drawn plan, and that what has been omitted does not fit well with this plan and is not needed. The only reason for including Moses in this *sūrah* is to disclose and/or shed light on parts of the history or religious tenets that some of the Israelites tend to conceal, dispute, or erase all together.

[56] Qur'ān 2:101.