

Nazm al-Qur'an and Methodological Pattern of Ibn 'Ashur: An Evaluation

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Abstract

Rhetoricians and exegetes have both paid attention to Nazm al-Qur'an with heightened interests. Unfortunately, not many mufasssirun managed to unfold the message of the Qur'an from the angle of Nazm al-Qur'an. Only few scholars applied the concept of Nazm al-Qur'an in their interpretation of the Qur'an. Al-RazT, al-Haralliyy, al-Biqat, al-Farahi, Ibn 'Ashur, Syed Mawdudi, Syed Qutb, and IslahT may be counted among those who furthered the cause of Nazm al-Qur'an. Methodology of these well-known mufasssirun does not represent the same pattern. The main task of these scholars has been to identify the coherence among all the components of a surah hence thematic unity in the surah. But they have been somewhat different from one another as to the way to identify the coherence. Muhammad al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur has developed his own methodology to do justice with his assignment of identifying the thematic units' in the Qur'an. In this paper an attempt will be made to identify Ibn 'Ashur's novel methodological pattern in his Tafsir work, which he applied to establish the position of Nazm al-Qur'an.

Introduction

It may not be exaggeration to suggest that in the classical history of Qur'anic interpretation only three names, Muhammad ibn Jarlr al-Tabari (d.310 A.H.), Mahmud ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharl (d.538 A.H.), and Muhammad ibn 'Umar Fakhr al-DIn al-RazT (d.606 A.H.) appear as the original trend setters of tafsir methodology. Others have simply followed them. It seems al-Tabari's *Jdmi'al-Baydn*, al-Zamakhshari's *Al-Kashshdf* and al-RazT's *Mafdtih al-Gliavb* represent original contributions, whereas other commentators of the Qur'an have

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merely been duplicating them in terms of not only the methodology but also the ideas and messages derived from the Qur'an. Only few mufassirun tried to make their own way in the field of tafsir. Most prominent among such names are Ibrahim ibn 'Umar Al-Biq'a'i (d.885 A.H.), 'Abd al-Hamid al-Farahi (d.1930 C.E.), Muhammad al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur (d.1973 C.E.), Syed Qutb (d.1966 C.E.), Syed Mawdudl (d.1979 C.E.), and Amin Ahsan Islahl (d.1997 C.E.). What makes these mufassirun different from others is their concept and application of Nazm al-Qur'an in tafslr. Al-Biq'aTs "*Nazm al-Durar fi Tandsiibb al-Aydt wa al-Suwar*" al-Farahi's "*Dald'il al-Nizdm*" Ibn 'Ashur's "*Al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwu*" Syed Qutb's "*Ff Zildl al-Qur'dri*" Syed Mawdudl's "*Tafliim al-Ow'dn*" and Islahi's "*Tadabbur-e-Qur'dn*" may be considered representatives of school of Nazm al-Qur'an. These tafslr works may not necessary be placed in either of the widely known categories of tafsir works such as traditional (*ma'thur*), rational (*ijtihddi*), jurisprudential (*JiqhT*), and scientific (*'ilmi*). With the mention of Nazm al-Qur'an as a school of tafsir, there arises a question as to its pattern. This paper's main objective is to introduce and evaluate Ibn 'Ashur's approach to Nazm al-Qur'an in his tafslr. Yet, an introduction to Nazm al-Qur'an as such will also be included in the discussion.

Nazm al-Qur'an and rhetoricians

Experts of the Qur'anic rhetoric developed the view that the rhetoric of the *Qur'an* which made it essentially different from that of the classical Arab poets and orators is inherent in AV/r/n *al-Qur'dn*. Al-Jahiz (d.255 A.M.), al-Rummani (d.384 A.H.), al-Khattabi (d.388 A.H.), al-Baqillam (d.403 A.H.), and al-Juijam (d.471 A.H.) paid special attention to the immitability of the *Qur'an*. For that matter they identified the feature of *Nazm al-Qur'an* as an iimitable feature. According to them, all the words of a Qur'anic sentence represent a particular sequence as to their desirable imports; if the existing order of the words of *Qur'anic avail* is altered or any of the original words is replaced with its synonym, the sentence will certainly lose its inimitability as to its rhetoric.¹

¹. This is the gist of the ideas scattered in sources. See. Al-Jahiz. 'Amr ibn Bahr. *Al-Hayawan* (ed. Abd al-Salam. Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi. Beirut, n.d.). part 4, p. 89; Al-Khattabl. Hamd ibn Muhammad. *Bavdn I'jdz al-Qur'an* (eds. Muhammad Khalf Allah and Muhammad Zaghlawl. part of the edited work entitled "*T'ialathu Rasa'il fi I'ci: ul-Oiir'dn*". Dar al-Ma'arif. Lgypt. n.d.). 4th edition, p. 27; Al-lurjam. 'Abd al-Qahir. *Dala'il al-I'jdi* (ed.

Nazm al-Qur'an and Exegetes

Writing commentary of the entire Qur'an may be traced back to the time of *tdbi 'un* scholars such as Shu'bah ibn al-Hajjaj (d.70 A.H.), Waki' ibn al-Jarrah (d.97 A.H.), and Sufyan ibn 'Uyaynah (d.98 A.H.). But their works seem to have been lost in the vicissitudes of the time. The oldest extant work representing the interpretation of the whole *Qur'an* is *Jdmi' al-Baydn fl Ta 'wil al-Qur'dn* by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabarl (d.310 A.H.)- It is based on the views of *sahdbah*, *tdbi Tin*, and later generations of scholars. Al-Tabarl has also, at times, given his own understanding of Qur'anic words and statements. At no place he has referred to *Nazm al-Qur'an* in his voluminous work. He may be considered trend setter in *tafslr*. Others after him either followed into his footprints or made, in addition, some new trends. Al-Zamakhshan (d.538 A.H.) appears to be the first such *mufassir* who added in his *tafslr* work semantic and *ijtihddl* dimensions. His impact may easily be spotted in later *tafslr* works representing rational trend in *tafslr*. A-RazI (d.606 A.H.) seems to have followed both al-Tabari and al-Zamakhshari in his *tafslr* work, *Mafdtlh al-Ghayb*, widening the scope of traditional and rational methodology of *tafslr*. It is Qadl 'Abd al-Jabbar (d.415 A.H.) who may be considered the first *mufassir* who tried to show in his work "*Tanzih al-Qur'dn 'an al-Matd'in*" coherence among *dydt* of a *surah*. It seems al-Razi borrowed the concept of *Nazm al-Qur'an* in *tafslr* from him and tried in his own way to trace link between one *ayah* of a *surah* and another. Although he practically implemented *Nazm al-Qur'an* theory in his endeavor to unfold the message of God, he did not take *Nazm al-Qur'an* more than a mere academic witticism (*latlfah 'ilmiyyah*). One may hardly identify any principle or set of principles in his treatment of *Nazm al-Qur'dn*. Next to him comes 'Ah ibn Ahmad al-Haralllyy (d.637 A.H.) who interpreted the *Qur'an* on the basis of the theory that all the verses of a *surah* are mutually coherent. His *tafsir* work "*Miftdh al-Bdb al-Muqaffal li Falun al-Qur'dn al-Munazzal*" is not available in published form. Ibrahim ibn 'Umar al-Biqal (d.885 A.H.) is another prominent *mufassir* who furthered the cause of *Nazm al-Qur'an* in his *tafslr*

Mahmud Muhammad Shakir. Maktaba al-K.hanjT. Cairo. 1983). pp. 49-50: Al-Baqillani. Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib. 1'jaz al- Qur'an (ed. Ahmad Saqr. Dar al-Ma'arif, Egypt, n.d.). 5th edition, pp. 276-277; Mustansir Mir. *Coherence in the Qur'an* (American Trust Publications, USA. 1986). PP. 10-16.

work. "*Nazm al-Durar jl Tandsub al-Aydt wa al-Suwar*". After him one may not trace any *mufassir* who took the theory of *Nazm al-Qur'an* seriously for around six centuries. The trends dominating the *tafsir* field during this period have been the ones set by al-Tabari, al-Zamakhshari and al-Razi. In the beginning of the twentieth century C.E. a scholar from India, 'Abd al-Hamid al-Farahi (d. 1930 C.E.) emerged as the proponent of the *Nazm al-Qur'an* theory. He is the first who came to define this theory and also develop complete set of principles and rules of *tafsir* conforming *Nazm al-Qur'an* as methodology of *tafsir*. His notes and deliberations have been published under the title "*Rasa 'il al-Irindm al-Fardhl*". In these treatises he has outlined and elaborated all the steps of *Nazm al-Qur'an* as methodology. He had an ambitious plan to write the *tafsir* of the whole *Qur'dn* based on his principles. Unfortunately he could not go beyond interpreting *Surah al-Baqarah* and some short *surahs* from the last part of the *Qur'an*. But his disciple, Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997 C.E.) took up the challenge and completed the *tafsir* of the *Qur'dn*, "*Tadabbur-e-Qur'dn*" in Urdu based on *Nazm al-Qur'dn*. Syed Qutb (d.1966 C.E.), Syed Mawdudi (d.1979 C.E.), and Muhammad Asad (d.1992 C.E.) seem to have been greatly influenced by the *Nazm al-Qur'an* theory as expounded by al-Farahi.

Nazm al-Qur'an: Definition

An eloquent speech contains several components: 1) the central theme, 2) the preface, 3) the context, and 4) the conclusion. The *Qur'dn* is undoubtedly the most eloquent speech. All of its *surahs* contain the above-mentioned four components. Application of *Nazm al-Qur'an* in the interpretation of a *surah* requires the *mufassir* to identify these four elements through deliberation over each and every single statement of the *surah*, on the one hand, and establish link among them, on the other. This deliberation (*tadabbur*) needs to be done over and over again. Merely once or twice it may not do. As it appears from the term, *Nazm al-Qur'an* is a theory advocating the fact that all the verses of a *surah* as well as all the *surahs* of the *Qur'dn* are closely connected to one another. The statements of the *Qur'dn*, which, at times, appears to be incoherent are as a matter of fact fully coherent. *Nazm al-Qur'an* may be defined as a theory confirming the existence of coherence in the *Qur'an*.

Muslim Scholars' Observation on Nazm al-Qur'an

Theoretically, a number of Muslim scholars appreciate the *Nazm al-Qur'an* theory. Abu Bakr 'Abd Allah ibn Muhammad al-Nisapuri (d.324 A.H.), one of the teachers of great *Hadlth* scholar al-Darqutm in Baghdad used to shed light in his lectures on the *Qur'an* on how the *dydt* of a *surah* were correlated to each other.² Abu Bakr ibn al-'Arabl (d.543 A.H.) says that identifying co-relationship among *dydt* of a *surah* with a view to making them appear one coherent statement is indeed a great knowledge." Fakhr al-DIn al-Razi (d.606 A.H.) observes about *Surah Fussilat* that it appears to be a well-organized statement right from its beginning until its end. Great fiqh scholar, 'Izu al-DIn 'Abd al-Salam (d.660 A.H.) is reported to have declared the knowledge of *Nazm al-Qur'an* as an excellent knowledge. Al-SuyutI (d.911 A.H.) wrote a treatise "*Tanasuq al-Durar fi Tandsub al-Suwar*", highlighting the co-relationship between the *surahs* of the *Qur'dn*. He was of the view that *Nazm al-Qur'an* was a highly commendable discipline but due to it being very difficult only few mufasssirin dared venture into it.⁶ Ibn al-Naqlb al-Maqdisi (d.697 A.H.) tried to show coherence between many verses of the *Qur'dn*. But he could not maintain this trend throughout his *tafsir* work.' Shaykh Wall al-DTn al-MalawI (d.774 A.H.) believed that the re-arrangement of the *Qur'dn* in the non-chronological order by the Prophet (s.a.w.) in the light of the divine instruction signified coherence in the *Qur'dn*. Al-Farahi (d. 1930 C.E.) writes that an effective statement cannot afford to

². Al-Zarkashi. Badr al-DIn, Al-Burhan fi 'Ulum al-Quran (Dar al-Fikr. Beirut. 1994), vol. 1. p. 132. ⁵ Ibid.

⁴ Al-Razi. Fakhr al-DIn, Matatih al-Ghayb (Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabl, Beirut. 1997). vol. 9. p. 569.

⁵ Al-ZarkashI, op. cit., vol. 1. p. 132.

⁶. Al-SuyutI, Jalal al-DIn. Al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an (Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, n.d.). vol. 1, p. 132.

⁷. Al-Biqā 'I, Ibrahim ibn 'Dinar, Nazm al-Durar (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut. 1995), vol. 1, Muqaddimah. p.7.

⁸ Al-SuyutI. op. cit.. vol. 2. p. 108.

⁹ Al-FarahI. 'Abd al-HamId. Rasa'il al-Imam al-FarahI fi 'Ial-Qur'an (Al-Da'irah al-Hamldlyyah. Sarai Mir. India. 1991). p. 51.

¹⁰ Syed Mawdudi, Tallinn al-Qur'an (Idara Tarjuman al-Qur'an, Lahore. 1997). vol. 1, Muqaddimah. pp. 14-15.

¹¹ Islahl. Amin Ahsan, Tadabbur-e-Qur'an (Taj Company, Delhi, 1997), vol. 1, Muqaddimah, p. 20.

be disorderly; those who believe in the inimitability of the *Qur'an* have the responsibility to identify coherence in its verses and organization in its rulings.⁹ To Syed Mawdudi (d. 1979 C.E.), the *Qur'an* does appear to the first time reader incoherent, disorganized, and non-cohesive but as a matter of fact each and every component of the *Qur'an* is well-organized and cohesive.¹⁰ Amin Ahsan Islah (d.1997 C.E.) opines that without tracing link between an *ayah* of the *Qur'an* and another in the same *surah* one may not reach the truth.

Feasibility of Nazm al-Qur'an

The figure of the Qur'anic exegetes is very high. Very few of them applied *Nazm al-Qur'an* as a methodology of *tafsir*. What does this situation refer to? Does it not signify the impracticability of the theory, rendering it as mere hypothesis? Certainly, it is not a hypothesis; it is a proven theory. Scholars, even though few, have applied the principle of *Nazm al-Qur'an* in their *tafsir* works. The existence of *tafsir* works based on *Nazm al-Qur'an* serves as sufficient evidence for its efficacy. Yet, the Question remains in place as to why majority of scholars could not uphold this idea of coherence. Amin Ahsan Islah suggests that the distance between the time of the *Qur'an's* revelation and the time thereafter has made the task of identifying coherence in the *Qur'an* somewhat difficult. He explains that the two features of the classical Arabic hence of the *Qur'an*, *hadhf* (ellipsis) and *ijdz* (brevity) have also complicated the matter. To him, the commentator who is unaware of the classical Arabic poetry and oration or who ignores these two dimensions of the *Qur'anic* statements finds it difficult to trace co-relationship among the verses of a *surah*.¹¹² "One may hardly contest the idea proposed by Islah.

Objective of a task determines its method. One may find various objectives behind the commentary of the *Qur'an*. Traditionalists such as al-Tabari (d.310 A.H.), al-Samarqandi (d.373 A.H.), al-Tha'labi (d.427 A.H.), al-Baghawi (d.510 A.H.), Ibn Kathir (d.774 A.H.), and al-Suyuti (d.911 A.H.) wrote their *tafsir* works in order to merely collect the *tafsir* views of the previous generation scholars. Rationalists such as al-Zamakhshari (d.538 A.H.), al-Razi (d.606 A.H.), al-Baydawi (d.685 A.H.), Ibn Hayyan (d.745 A.H.), and al-Alusi (d. 1270 A.H.) paid attention to the message of the *Qur'an* from philosophical, philological, and rational angles so as to rebut others' views and substantiate their

¹² Ibid.

own stands. Jurists like al-Jassas (d.370 A.H.), al-Kiya al-HarrasT (d.504 A.H.), Ibn al-'Arabl (d.543 A.H.), and al-Qurtubl (d.671 A.H.) supported in their works *Hanafi*, *Shaft 7*, and *Mdliki* schools of jurisprudence respectively. These objectives did not allow commentators of the *Qur 'an* to spend their time on identifying the coherence among various components of a *surah*.

Ibn Ashur's Tafsir Work vis-a-vis Nazm al-Qur'an

Ibn 'Ashur has written a long preface to his tafsir work. He has dealt with therein ten issues pertaining to tafsir: (1) Authentic Interpretation of the Qur'an, (2) Scope of Tafsir as a Discipline

of Knowledge, (3) Significance of both Traditional and Rational Tafsir Methodologies, (4) The Objective of Mufassir's Task, (5) Socio-Historical Backgrounds of Revelations, (6) Varieties of Reading Styles of the Qur'an, (7) Qur'anic Historical Narratives, (8) The Qur'an's Name and Its Verses and Chapters, (9) Original Messages of the Qur'anic Statements, and (10) Inimitability of the Qur'an. He has discussed in somewhat detail the controversies among Muslim scholars over the above issues and tried to come

up with some conclusion in a decisive manner. As for Nazm al-Qur'an and its role in tafslr, he has touched them in the last issue of his preface. It seems he sides with rhetoricians in the concept of Nazm al-Qur'an as the basis of I'jaz al-Qur'an (mimitability of the Qur'an). It may not be deemed as inappropriate to have an overview of Ibn 'Ashur's tafslr methodology before his approach to Nazm al-Qur'an is looked at in detail.

An Overview of Ibn 'Ashur's Tafslr Methodology

A cursory look at Ibn 'Ashur's treatment of Qur'anic interpretation may suffice to place him at par with many other mufassirun from the lists of traditionalists and rationalists, on the one hand, and also slightly different from them, on the other. His methodological pattern of tafslr of every surah may be summarized like this: (1) identifying the basis of surah's well-known and less known names, (2) referring to the exact number of ayat of the surah, (3) investigating into the period of revelation of surah, Makkan or Madinan, (4) establishing the position of surah in chronological order, (5) reporting socio-historical background of surah's revelation, (6) enumerating objectives of surah, (7) explaining the ayat one by one in the light of rhetoric and eloquence

of the language, (8) informing about jurisprudential views or controversies over legislative ayat of surah, (9) clarifying semantic bases of some words in ayat of surah, (10) stating controversy among experts of Qur'anic reading over certain particular word/words, (11) quoting differences of opinions of philologists and linguists over the significance of certain words in an ayah of surah, and (12) deliberating over the reason of link between apparently unrelated ayat of surah.

A concrete example of how he carries out his delicate task of tafslr may not be out of place. Here is brief reproduction of how he deals with Surah al-Tahrim (66).

The name of this surah is derived from the first ayah. Two other names—Surah Lima Tuharrimu and Surah al-Nabry—are also reported in the sources. Authorities are unanimous over its number of ayat as twelve. According to majority of scholars, it is Madinan revelation. It is one of those surahs that came down after Surah al-Hujurat (47) and before Surah al-Jumu'ah (62). Its second ayah (*"Allah has already ordained for you absolution from your oaths"*) indicates that it came down after Surah al-Ma'idah. Its reason of revelation is based on two events related to the Prophet's (s.a.w.) wives. First, the Prophet (s.a.w.) once took honey in one his wives' apartment; it caused him to stay there more than usual time; it angered 'Aishah who, then, made a plan along with all of the wives of the Prophet (s.a.w.) to express their displeasure over the Prophet's taking honey which gave foul smell. When as per the plan the Prophet's (s.a.w.) wives expressed their displeasure over the foul smell allegedly emanating from the Prophet's (s.a.w.) mouth, the Prophet vowed not to take honey any more. Second, when Hafsa, one of the Prophet's (s.a.w.) wives saw the Prophet (s.a.w.) in her own apartment along with his slave-girl, she got angry and the Prophet (s.a.w.) vowed there not to have any physical relationship with her slave-girl any longer.

Objectives of this surah are seven: (1) warning that one is not authorized to make unlawful what Allah made lawful, (2) disclosing to the Prophet (s.a.w.) what was not known to him in relation to his own household, (3) making clear that absolution of oaths through expiation is obligatory, (4) teaching wives that they should not put on their husbands unnecessary pressure which may lead to their divorce, (5) advising the people in general to take care of their family members in

Islamic orientation, (6) describing the reward for good acts and punishment for evil-doings, and (7) advancing two examples of women with undesirable character and two examples of women with exemplary character so as to bring home some lesson for women in believers' households.

In the first ayah the Prophet (s.a.w.) was questioned as to why he made unlawful what Allah made lawful for him. The Prophet (s.a.w.) had not actually made anything which was lawful unlawful for him; he had simply vowed to abstain from that as it was not possible for the Prophet (s.a.w.) to alter the lawful into unlawful. The phrase—"why do you make unlawful what Allah made lawful"—does not necessarily denote that the Prophet (s.a.w.) changed the position of divine law of halal and haram. The second ayah refers to the obligation of vow-absolution through expiation. It is controversial whether the Prophet (s.a.w.) expiated his oath or not. As for the message of this ayah, according to Malik ibn Anas and Abu Hanifah expiation of vow is obligatory. But concerning someone really making unlawful what is lawful there are around eighteen views, some suggesting it as nonsense, and some others making it clear case for expiation. Ayat 3-5 contain twenty messages for the wives of the Prophet (s.a.w.) with a view to warning them that they should not put unnecessary pressure on the Prophet (s.a.w.) because it might lead to their replacement with other women who are far better in their Islamic character than they are. In the sixth ayah, the believers in general have been addressed. The link between the first five ayat and the sixth one is that the ayat 1-5 indirectly advises the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his wives that there should be a regular Islamic orientation of the household so as avoid the wrath of Allah; and the ayah no. 6 directly reminds the followers of the Prophet (s.a.w.) of the significance of Islamic orientation of the family members. The seventh ayah directly warns disbelievers and indirectly believers that in case of negligence of Islamic code of conduct, no excuse will be any avail on the Day of Judgment. The eighth ayah advises believers to turn to Allah again and again in repentance due to which their entry into the paradise is destined.

The ninth ayahs appear to be disconnected with the previous ayat (1-8). The relationship between the previous ayat and the ninth one is that when Allah warned the disbelievers in the seventh ayah, in the ninth one Allah commands the Prophet (s.a.w.) to purify the society of its anti-social elements by making jihad against the disbelievers as well as

hypocrites. In the beginning of the surah, the Prophet (s.a.w.) was commanded to rectify the domestic errors and develop an ideal family along Islamic principles. Here in the ninth ayah, the Prophet (s.a.w.) was once again ordained to establish the society on Islamic principles.

Ayat 10-12 also appear incoherent with the previous ayat. The tenth ayah mentions that the wife of Noah and wife of Lot are destined for the hell, despite their being wives of Prophets of Allah, due to their betrayal of their husbands. The eleventh ayah refers to the wife of Pharaoh as a pious lady who deserves the mercy of Allah, despite her being the wife of the tyrant king. The last ayah states the case of Mary the mother of Jesus, who obeyed Allah with due obedience. These last three ayat serve source of warning and lesson for both the Prophet's (s.a.w.) household and the believers in general that their apparent relationship with the Prophet (s.a.w.) may not necessarily guarantee blissful life in the hereafter; what can ensure success in the life hereafter is their obedience to Allah and His Prophet in the real sense of the word.¹³

Ibn 'Ashur's Effort of Establishing Coherence among Ayat of a Surah

It may not be an easy task for anyone to trace link among apparently incoherent statements in a surah. That is why mufasssirin in general do not care much about the link between an ayah and its preceding and succeeding ayat. There are usually two categories of ayat in a surah: (1) ayat among which even a little deliberation may suffice to identify the coherence, and (2) ayat, which make it incumbent upon the commentators to spend whole life-time to come up with the idea of coherence among them. Ibn 'Ashur seems to have successfully completed his task of establishing coherence among both kinds of ayat. A serious reading of his tafsir work may enable one to understand how he manages to trace link among apparently incoherent ayat. He uses various sources in this regard: (1) authentic traditions attributed to the Prophet (s.a.w.), (2) views of Muslim scholars including mufasssirin particularly al-Zamakhshari and al-Razi, (3) Qur'anic rhetoric and eloquence, (4) classical Arab style of speech, (5) his own deliberation (tadabbur).

¹³ Ibn 'Ashur. Muhammad al-Tahir. *Al-Tahrir |va at-Tamvir* (Mu'assasah al-Tarikh al-'Arabi. Beirut. 2000). vol. 28. pp. 307-340.

Below are given some concrete examples of how Ibn 'Ashur traces link among apparently incoherent ayat and what. These examples comprise three surahs, *al-Fdfihah* (1), *al-Baqarah* (2). and *al-Jwnu 'ah* (62).

Coherence in Surah al-Fatihah

Ibn 'Ashur brings in a tradition as recorded by Muslim to highlight the coherence among the ayat of Surah al-Fatihah.

"Allah said: I divided prayer into two halves between Me and My servant; one half is for Me and the other for My servant; and for My servant is what he requested for. The servant says: 'All praise is due to the Lord of the worlds', I say: 'My servant praised Me'. When the servant says: 'The Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful', Allah says: 'My servant admired Me'. When the servant says: 'Authority of the Day of Recompense', Allah says: 'My servant honored Me'. When he says: 'Thee alone we worship; Thee alone we invoke', Allah says: 'This between Me and My servant'. When he says: 'Guide us to the straight way: the way of those upon whom You showered your Grace, not the way of those who earned Your anger, nor of those who went astray', Allah says: 'This is for My servant and for the servant is what he asked'.¹⁴By quoting this tradition, Ibn 'Ashur has made it clear how the statements of the first surah of the Qur'an form one coherent passage of invocation.

Coherence among Various Passages of Surah al-Baqarah

There are a val in Surah al-Baqarah that are quite apparently coherent. There are also ayat therein which outwardly look incoherent. Ibn 'Ashur has done his best to explain the link among apparent disconnected ayat. Concrete examples are advanced below.

Ayat 1-29 appear to be closely connected to each other. In this speech Allah has divided the people into three categories, believers, non-believers, and hypocrites. Allah has warned the non-believers and the hypocrites of the dire consequences of their rejection of the truth. Allah has reminded them of their folly through metaphoric statements. Allah has also invited them to submit to him because He is the only one who deserves it as He is the Creator and the Controller of the entire universe. The ayah 29 states that Allah is the Creator of all that exists and the Knower of all that exists. Immediately after this the passage

¹⁴ Ibid.. Vol. 1. p. 134.

comprising ayat 30-39 talk about: (1) creation of Adam, his position as Khalifah, knowledgeable, and honorable, (2) angels' acceptance and Satan's rejection of Adam's superiority, (3) Adam and Eve's living in the paradise, (4) their violation of Allah's command hence their expulsion from the paradise. (5) their repentance upon realization of their error, and (6) the beginning of their worldly life.

Ibn 'Ashur says that the coherence between the ayat 1-29 and the ayat 30 onward is that when Allah mentioned Himself as the Creator of the entire universe (2:29). he mentioned how he created the first man, Adam with a view to attracting humankind's attention to the grace of Allah he showered upon them by making their father. Adam Khalifah on the earth.¹⁵

What Ibn 'Ashur suggests here may be acceptable as the reason for coherence between ayat 29-30. but it may not justify the link among the two passages—2:1-29 and 2:30-39. As Islahi proposes, the link between the two passages is that when Allah mentioned mainly two categories of people, loyal to Him and disloyal to Him, He brought the story of Adam and Satan to liken the disbelievers to Satan and the believers to their own original parents, and also to invite the man to always remember that Satan is their original enemy hence they should keep away from following into the footprints of Satan and adopt the approach of their first parents who when made error returned to Allah through repentance and mending their ways.¹⁶

In order to prove coherence between the ayat 2:1-39 and the ayah 2: 40 with which begins the address to Jews, Ibn 'Ashur claims that the main address until 2:39 was to the disbelievers (polytheists), and then from 2:40 the deniers of the truth from among the Jews have been reminded of where they went wrong. Here the explanation of Ibn 'Ashur may be appreciated well. His statement makes the matter clear. It seems here that he took into consideration the situation in Madinah at the time of revelation of Surah al-Baqarah. Certainly, the audience of Madmah in particular and that of Arabian Peninsula in general which consisted of four categories of people, believers, Arab non-believers, hypocrites, and Jews have been addressed in this surah. The address, at

¹⁵ Ibid..pp. 381-382.

times, is aimed at one people and, at some other times, it is for some other people.

Ibn 'Ashur does not seem to be aware of the significance of central theme of surah. He has not mentioned in his tafsir of any surah the concept of central theme. Had he paid attention to the central theme of Surah al-Baqarah, he would have definitely found the task of establishing link between its ayat and passages far easier. According to Syed Qutb and Islahl, the central theme of this surah is the change of leadership from the Jews to the followers of Muhammad.¹⁷ Thus all the passages of this surah revolve around this major theme.

Al-Baqarah: 221-241 deal with social issues of marriage, divorce, and waiting period. But ayat 238-239 contain a totally different subject matter. These two statements counsel Muslims to heed to prayers in general and late afternoon prayer ('Asr) in particular so as to ensure obedience to Allah. One may hardly explore any link between social issues and prayer. Ibn 'Ashur also seems to have fallen victim to the general notion that there is no apparent coherence between these two different subject matters. It is strange to hear from him this untenable statement: 'Change from one subject matter to another one in the ayat of the Qur'an does not necessarily entail the existence of coherence among ayat because the Qur'an is a text book compiled according to themes, but it is a book of counseling compiled out of revelations that are not necessarily coherent.¹⁸ More strange is another statement of Ibn 'Ashur that despite different subject matters put close to each other there might be some link in terms of the message.¹⁹

When interpreting the link between the issue of marriage and divorce and prayer, he suggests three possible reasons of coherence among these ayat. First, when so many social rules were given continuously, Allah invited us to worldly moral virtue (2: 237). Second, prayer is a spiritual act meant to generate piety and excellent virtues in life. Third, when the rules concerning worldly life ensuring material prosperity were mentioned, it was followed by rules which stand to

¹⁶ Islahl. Amin Ahsan, *Tadabbur-e-Qur'dn* (Taj Company, New Delhi, 1997). vol. 1. p. 153
¹⁷ Ibid., p. 652 ; Syed Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur 'cm* (Dar al-Shruq, Cairo. 1996), vol. 1. p. 28.

¹⁸ Ibn 'Ashur. op. cit., vol. 2. p. 443.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.444.

assure the pleasure in the life hereafter. Fourth, when the rights of mankind were dealt with, the rights of Allah were also highlighted.²⁰ This explanation does not yet justify the strong link between the ayat 221-241 which contain two essentially issues, marriage related issues and prayer. As Islahi suggests, Ibn 'Ashur should have read these ayat again and again with a view to reaching the thematic unity.

The guidelines and rules described in 2:221-241 are for those who are repent and maintain purity of body and soul (2:222), for those who are believers in the real sense of the word (2:223), for those who abstain from flouting the revealed regulations (2:229), for those who are paragon of virtues (236), and for those who keep to pious practices (241). In other words, only those with the above-mentioned qualities can do justice with the rule prescribed in 2:221-241. And in order to develop these required qualities, one has to generate in oneself another quality, sense of dedication (qanitin) which can be achieved only through prayers in general and late afternoon prayer in particular (2:238-239). This is the link among these ayat. It is, then, unbelievable that Ibn 'Ashur who believes in the position of the Qur'an as inimitable (I'jaz al-Qur'an) expresses his inability to understand the coherence in the above-mentioned ayat of al-Baqarah. Definitely, Ibn 'Ashur knew very well the significance of eloquence in an excellent speech. Only one who does not see eloquence in al-Baqarah can say what Ibn 'Ashur says. If he believed in the existence of eloquence in al-Baqarah, how he could not find coherence therein.

As al-Farahi believes, every eloquent speech comprises four elements, preface, context, central theme, and conclusion. Al-Baqarah's preface is constituted by ayat 2:1-5 which assert that the followers of Muhammad are the only people who are destined to blissful life. Its conclusion is in the last two ayat (2:285-286) which teach the believers to always invoke Allah for strength. In between these two components there are invitation to the disbelievers, condemnation of the Jews for their wrong doings, instructions to Muslims what to do when and where in the life, and caution to the followers of the Last Prophet (s.a.w.) that they should not fall victims to the same tactics Jews and others such as Christian did. As referred to above, the central theme of this surah is the change of leadership from the Jews to the followers of the Last Prophet (s.a.w.). This central theme is very obvious in the preface as well as in the conclusion of the surah.

²⁰ Ibid.

Coherence in Surah al-Jumu'ah

The first ayah (*"Whosoever is in the heavens and whosoever is on the earth glorifies Allah, the Sovereign, the Holy, the All-Mighty, the All-Wise"*), as Ibn 'Ashur claims, serves as motivation to the believers to be serious in Friday prayer.²¹ Here he seems to have followed al-Biq'a'i who also considers the significance of Friday prayer as the central theme of the surah."²²

Ibn 'Ashur shows the link between the first ayah which describe four great attributes of Allah and the second one which talks about the raising of the Last Prophet from the unlettered nation and his duties, rehearsal of His messages, purification of the people, education of the Book and the wisdom. He says: the attribute "Sovereign" is linked to the raising of the Prophet for the sake of mankind's reorientation; the attribute "Holy" is connected to the Prophet's duty of purifying the people; the attribute "All-Mighty" is related to the plan of Allah to elevate the unlettered nation to the power of knowledge and the position of honor; and the attribute "All-Wise" required the Prophet (s.a.w.) to teach the people Book and wisdom.²³ This seems to be a far-fetched speculation on the Nazm of the Qur'an. If al-Farahi's suggestion concerning preface of every surah is taken into consideration, the first ayah of this surah forms its preface and the last one its conclusion. The theory of Nazm al-Qur'an requires all the ayat between the preface and conclusion to be coherent. The preface of this surah refers to four attributes of Allah (Sovereign, Holy, All-Mighty, All-Wise) and the conclusion highlights another prominent attribute of Allah (the Best of Providers).

Ibn 'Ashur explains the link between ayah 62:4 (*"Such is Allah's bounty. He grants to whoever He wills and Allah is limitless in his great bounty"*) and ayah 62:5 (*"The similitude of those who were entrusted with Torah but who subsequently failed to bear it, is that of a donkey which carries huge tomes. Evil is the similitude of people who falsify the messages of Allah. And Allah does not guide those who do wrong"*) in this way. After the mention of Allah's bounty for the unlettered nation in the previous ayat, Allah has described how He granted His bounty to

²¹ Ibid., vol.28, p. 185.

²² Al-Biq'a'i, Ibrahim ibn 'Umar, *Nazm al-Dwarfi Tandsub al-dydt wa al-Smvar* (Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, Beirut,1995). vol. 7. p. 590.

²³ Ibn 'Ashur. op. cit.. vol. 28. pp. 185-186.

the bearers of 1 orah. Is it a tenable proposition for the reason of coherence between the above mentioned ayat? Ayah 62:5 indeed provides reason for why the unlettered people were granted Allah's bounty and why the Jews were deprived of that bounty even after the same bounty had been granted to them. The ayah says that the bounty was snatched away from them merely because they could not do justice with Torah, the sign and source of bounty.

Ayah 62:6 reads: *"Say: O you of Jewry! If von think that you are friends of Allah to the exclusion of others, then express your desire for death, if von are truthful"*. Ibn 'Ashur while showing its link with the previous ayah (62:5) says that the preceding ayah (62:5) refers to Jews' ignorance of Torah and this ayah (62:6) highlights another false claim of theirs that they were chosen people of Allah. Ibn 'Ashur did not make any real explanation on the link between two ayat. As a matter of fact, ayat 62:6-8 highlight the charge sheet against the Jews and justify their deprivation of the grace of Allah.

In his explanation of the ayat 62:9-10 (*"O you who believe! When the call is proclaimed tor prayer on Friday, Hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off business. That is best for you if you but know. And when the prayer is over, then may you disperse through the land, and seek of the bounty of Allah, and remember Allah frequently that you mav prosper*) Ibn 'Ashur claims that these ayat constitute the main objective of the surah; and the preceding ayat serve as preface to that objective. To justify his understanding he takes the help of al-Zamakhshari. According to him, Jews felt proud of Sabbath and considered it as a mark of superiority to Muslims hence Allah prescribed for Muslims Friday as special weekday.²⁴ It is not clear as to the authenticity of this report recorded in "Al-Kashshaf". Definitely, prescription of Friday as a special day for Muslim was not in response to the pride of Jews. These ayat (62:9-10) are linked to the concluding ayah 62:11 (*"When they saw some bargain or some pastime, thev dispersed headlong to it and leave you standing. Say: That which Allah has is better than any pastime or bargain; and Allah is the best of the providers"*). In the recent past it so happened that once majority of Muslims who were in the mosque listening to the Prophet's Friday sermon rushed out when they heard the sound of the arrival of some trade caravan. Allah, then, revealed the ayat 62:9-10 along with the last

²⁴ Ibn 'Ashur, op. cit. vol. 28, pp. 196-197. ^{^^} Islahl. op. cit.. vol

one with a view to training Muslims in religious duties and their etiquettes.

The relationship between these ayat 62:9-11 and 62:1-8 can easily be established with the help of central theme of this surah. According to Islahl, the central theme of this surah is warning to the children of Ishmael (followers of the Prophet Muhammad) that they remain cautious of the doings of the children of Israel lest they should also fall from the grace of Allah as Jews fell from the grace of Allah.²⁵ With this central theme, the link between the apparently two different themes (1-8 and 9-11) can easily be explained. In the first part (1-8) the reason of why the Jews were deprived of their leadership position has been mentioned. In the second part (9-11) followers of the Prophet (s.a.w.) have been reminded of their position warned that they should not repeat the same error as they did on some Friday because their leaving the Prophet on the pulpit and preferring pastime and business to the religious duty were unbecoming of their position as the bearer of the Last Revelation.

Conclusion

Ibn 'Ashur played his role as a mufassir to highlight coherence among the apparently incoherent statements of the Qur'an. It should be appreciated. Unfortunately, he could not have been in a position to lay his hands on the "Nazm al-Qur'an" theory in its detail as propounded and explained by 'Abd al-Hamid al-Farahi (d!930 C.E.). This theory is not merely about tracing link between various ayat of a surah, it is rather a tafslr methodology with well-defined principles. It seems that Ibn 'Ashur's contribution in this regard remains confined to the realm of i'jaz al-Qur'an. Nazm al-Qur'an of mufassirun is not only what rhetoricians have come up with. It is an internal aid for the interpretation of the Qur'an in a way that the whole Qur'an appears an eloquent speech of the source of all kinds of eloquence and rhetoric, Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala. □

²⁵ Islahi, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 373.