

## BOOK REVIEW

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***Qur'anic Pictures of the Universe: The Scriptural Foundation of Islamic Cosmology* by Osman Bakar.** (Brunei Darussalam: UBD Press; Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2016). ISBN 978-967-0526-26-3 (Hardback), 216 pp.; ISBN 978-967-0526-25-6 (pbk.), 224 pp.

***Qur'anic Pictures of the Universe: The Scriptural Foundation of Islamic Cosmology*** book is the latest book of Professor Dr Osman bin Bakar (1946- ) on the major scientific themes in the Qur'an. Prof. Osman has completed his Honors and M.Sc. in Mathematics (specializing in Algebra) at London University. In 1981, he perused M.A. in Comparative Religion and his Ph.D. in Philosophy of Science/Islamic Philosophy at Temple University. Throughout his academic career, he studied and taught Islamic Philosophy, History of Islamic Science, Philosophy of Islamic Science, and the Qur'anic perspectives of science. After long academic career he wrote this book as a research project and grant for "Scientific Exegesis" (*tafsir 'ilmiy*) of the Qur'an initiated and funded by the Royal Ahl al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman.

Because of our academic limitations and language barrier, we could not discover the "scientific Qur'anic exegesis" (*tafsir 'ilmiy*) of Turkish theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's works earlier than the seminal work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933- ), an Iranian origin emeritus professor of Islamic studies and an Islamic philosopher at George Washington University, USA. He wrote a book in 1964, entitled "*An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina.*"<sup>3</sup> This is not a scientific exegesis, but Nasr focuses primarily the cosmological Islamic doctrines from the Qur'anic and philosophical perspectives. His intention was to make easy representation to the readers to understand the difficult issues. This work still considers as the significant and extensive work on Islamic cosmology and well accepted by everyone.

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<sup>3</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina*, Revised (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1978).

So far I guess, Professor Osman do not have access to the work of Turkish theologian Said Nursi's (1877-1960) '*Risale-i Nur*' (Treatise of Light). Nursi promulgated Islam and the Quran as the scientific basis in the face of challenges of the then Turkey while secularism and atheism were attacking Islam and the Qur'an. Nursi started his writing in 1911 till 1949. *The Word*<sup>4</sup> and *the Sign of Miraculousness*<sup>5</sup> are the two books of Nursi extensively written to prove the existence of God in cosmos and in the Universe through the Qur'anic proofs based on practical examples. He took challenge in response to the declaration of the British Colonial Minister William Gladstone, and said "I shall prove and demonstrate to the world that the Qur'an is an undying, inextinguishable Sun!"<sup>6</sup> As a result of Nursi's careful observation, he took the challenge to prove the Qur'anic miraculousness with scientific proofs and consequently, defeated secularism, atheism and modern sciences and established the Qur'an as the word of Allah. Consequently, he proved the compatibility of modern sciences with the Qur'an and he wrote the scientific exegesis (*tafsir 'ilmiy*). However, Prof. Osman did not mention his name, though Nursi felt the same feelings and methodologies to prove the Qur'anic sciences during the Kemalist Era (1923-1950) in Turkey. If Prof. Osman could know the previous work done by Said Nursi, may be his research might enriched more and readers get different dimensions of knowledge and get more benefits out of it.

Author's through study of the Qur'an, philosophy and modern sciences, the Qur'anic perspectives of cosmos demonstrates there are many pictures of the Universe as identify in the light of the Qur'an. From the wide variety of the pictures, author discusses few of them in his book so that readers can easily understand the easy pictures of the Universe. This book investigates the common visions among various visions of the Universe in the light of the Qur'an and highlights only the easiest visions of Universe to understand in general. For him, "...the Qur'an's visions of the Universe are many and varied....as among the easiest to understand".<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the author maintains the central unity among pictures of the universe and discovers coherence and thematic unity in the related verses of the Qur'an.

<sup>4</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Şükran Vahide, New Edition (Cağaloğlu, İstanbul, Turkey: Sözler Neşriyat, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Said Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of the Qur'an's Conciseness*, trans. Şükran Vahide, Reised edition, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (SUNY Press, 2012), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Osman Bakar, *Qur'anic Pictures of the Universe: The Scriptural Foundation of Islamic Cosmology* (Brunei Darussalam: UBD Press; Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2016), 1.

This book deals with the thematic study of the Qur'an especially Qur'anic depiction of the Universe and secondly the nature of Islamic cosmology in the Qur'an and classical exegesis. This work will contribute to the modern understanding of the Qur'anic interpretation and explanation of Islamic cosmology on the basis of scientific exegesis (*tafsir 'ilmiy*) of the Qur'an. According to him, the Qur'anic understanding of Cosmos demonstrates various pictures of its realities and each reality is distinct and maintaining central command and unity with other realities. This book will help to knowledge seekers about the Qur'anic understanding of cosmology (*fahmu eilim al-Kawniah*), the natural sciences (*al'aulum al-Tabieiah*), divine relationship (*tawhid al-Rububiyyah*), and relationship between religion and sciences (*al-'Alaqat bayna al-din wal-'ulum*). This is basically new addition in the body of existing knowledge in the field of theology and exegesis. According to author, "... this book may be viewed as a work on scientific exegesis (*tafsir 'ilmiy*) of the Qur'an."<sup>8</sup>

This book consists of seven chapters, following by an introduction, bibliography and vey helpful index of names and technical terms. There are seven chapters in this book. Chapter one and two are the definitional and clarification about the varieties of pictures of the Universe in the Qur'an and author rationalized why they are many. These chapters are:

1. Definition of the Universe in the Qur'an
2. Why there are many pictures of the Universe in the Qur'an
3. The Astronomical picture of the Universe
4. The Architectural picture of the Universe
5. The picture of the Cosmos as a Divine Kingdom
6. The Universe as a World of Lights and Darkness
7. The Human microcosm in the Qur'an: the Universe within Man

In Chapter one, author very carefully defines the Universe from lexiconic point of view and side by side relevantize with the Qur'anic verses and classical exegesis and philosophical views where applicable. Author also draws a clear understanding regarding the metaphysical relationship between Allah and the Cosmos in various forms as *al-'Alim* (the All-Knowing), *rabb al-'alamin* (the Lord of all the worlds) and so on.

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<sup>8</sup> Osman Bakar, 3.

In chapter two, author explains the fundamental reason why there are infinite numbers of pictures of the Universe; because of its metaphysical or theological nature. He remarks the Universe as the manifestation of Allah's Self-disclosure through His divine name and Qualities. He divides the Universe primarily as *al-'alam al-Kabir*<sup>9</sup> (macrocosm) and *al-'alam al-saghir*<sup>10</sup> (microcosm). In addition, the author similarly illustrates there are many worlds in the Universe like: the angelic world (*'alam al-mala'ikah*)<sup>11</sup>, the world of jinn (*'alam al-jinn*)<sup>12</sup>, the world of mankind (*'alam al-ins*)<sup>13</sup> and so on. Furthermore, he treats human as unique creation in the physical world and there is something divine spirituality (*min ruhi*) within him that carry out from the Adam to the till date.

In Chapter three, the real pictures of the Universe started from here. The author focuses only on the physical cosmos though there are various cosmos found in the Qur'an. He depicts this cosmos as an astronomical picture of the cosmos. This cosmos deals with celestial bodies focusing solar system, their motions and configuration in space and their function.<sup>14</sup> Very interestingly, author examines the definitions and the scope of the study from the modern scientific point of view and argues for the broader area of study that is expanding Cosmos while traditional scientist debating over the expanding of the cosmos. For him, "this space is not static, or a constant thing. Rather, it is 'dynamic,' not contracting but extending and expanding."<sup>15</sup> In the course of the discussion, author has succeeded in presenting some new ideas and generating new knowledge regarding the interpretation of the astronomical conception of the universe based on clear insights from the Qur'an and classical and modern Tafasir.

In Chapter four, the second picture is described as "the architectural picture." It depicts the Universe as a divine work with proper planning and focused purposes as the idea of the Earth as man's planetary home of abode with a solid construction, a perfect architectural design, and a beautiful ornamentation."<sup>16</sup> The author logically relates the Qur'anic word '*bana*' to the architectural structure of the world. Furthermore, the author explains the mechanism of the creation of the cosmos and gigantic celestial bodies

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<sup>9</sup> Osman Bakar, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Osman Bakar, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Osman Bakar, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Osman Bakar, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Osman Bakar, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Osman Bakar, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Osman Bakar, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Osman Bakar, 83.

and how everything is depending on the Divine Will, i.e. the natural force of gravity and finally one day it will be smashed by the same Divine Will.

In Chapter five, the third picture is presented by the author as the picture of “the divine kingdom” in which there is perfect governance, law and order. In addition, there are central unity and relation among the different parts and forces of the cosmos. The kingdom “extends from the Divine Throne (*al-‘arsh*) to the furthest region of the material world where the planet Earth, the home of God’s vicegerents, namely the human species, is situated.”<sup>17</sup>

In Chapter six, the fourth picture depicts the Universe as a hierarchy of light (*nur*) and darkness (*zulumat*).<sup>18</sup> The author points out some verses that deal with the light and darkness used in different connotations. Moreover, Allah manifests His light in the whole of creation. However, light symbolizes here Allah’s manifestation in the whole creation. The purpose of man’s existence is to reflect to the best degree the Light of the Divine Names and Qualities so that he will become the “Perfect Man”<sup>19</sup> (*al-insan al-kamil*) and while darkness resembles all negative qualities and wave of ferocious attributes, which impel the soul to wrath, enmity, hatred, prejudice, envy, boastfulness, ostentation, pride.”<sup>20</sup>

In Chapter seven, the fifth picture is described as “the Human Microcosm in the Qur’an” picture, which depicts human being as “a perfect replica of the whole Universe.”<sup>21</sup> The idea of microcosm has an important epistemological role in traditional Islamic science. The very term ‘microcosm’ is not found in the Qur’an. However, the author scientifically managed to establish in the knowledge world of the Qur’an and extracts 9 different verses in favor of this term. For Him, “the idea of man as a microcosm, it is possible to argue that this idea is a key conceptual component of the Qur’anic worldview.”<sup>22</sup>

This book is well circulated and well read among the young scholars and the scholars of different branches especially who have scholarship in philosophy and science in the different part of the world. Globally this kind of thinking and initiative is much more appreciable by the leading scholars, so that young generation can take the next intel-

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<sup>17</sup> Osman Bakar, 89–90.

<sup>18</sup> Osman Bakar, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Osman Bakar, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Osman Bakar, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Osman Bakar, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Osman Bakar, 190.

lectual leadership in the field of philosophy and sciences and can continue. While Muslims are lag behind in science and religion, and particularly they cannot translate their Qur'anic knowledge to the modern world, this book will be the paradigm shifting for them. The exceptional characteristics of his book are, it is based on the true Islamic knowledge, comparative discussion from the Islamic and western perspectives and the intention to make his books easy to the readers. We are expecting that young generation of the Muslim world will come forward to do research in the field of different branches of sciences and able to relate with the Quran.

To some extent, there is a very common scenario in Bangladesh, Ulema, theologians and who are studying Islam in any respect are a little bit aloof from knowing the critical issues of knowledge world; for example: sociology, political science, pure and biological sciences, social science related subjects, philosophy, science and critical study. We are not happy at all with this stand of learned persons. We expect that they will come forward and the secular sciences and knowledge and likewise other knowledge these are very much needed in modern time. If our Muslims intellectual would like to lead the nation, you need to know many necessary branches of knowledge and help to know others. Intention of this book review is to introduce this book to the Islamic scholars who are interested in the Islamic cosmology, Islamic science, and Islamic philosophy.

In conclusion, Prof. Osman, as a careful and prolific scholar, pointed out the easiest visions of the Universe highlights in the Qur'an to understand for general readers. He presents clear and easy definitions of the philosophical and Qur'anic terms and obviously quotations from classical scholars of Kalam and Tafsir that is admirable. He also carefully selects all the Qur'anic verses as chronological order and very relevant verses to the subject matter, so that his claim, readers can easily understand the hard subject matters. Regarding the scientific and philosophical terms, he demonstrates mastery over there by explaining both in general and the Qur'anic terms. We hope, readers will easily get answer to their questions through this book. This book is easy to understand as difficult subject and worth reading. As this research project initiates to make understand the subject matter to readers, we think, this is completely a successful research project and highly appreciates the seminal work done by Prof. Osman. For example: the issues of seven heavens and evolution of human being, author very successfully explains these two complex issues and establishes the Qur'anic discourses using the scientific exegesis (*tafsir 'ilmiy*) and philosophical argumentations method both as scholarly manner. Furthermore, we wish the best circulation of this book, so that, in true sense, students, academics and researchers could able to understand new paradigm of Islamic philosophy and Qur'anic sciences and get benefit out of it.