



Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text (Islamic Encounter Series)

By Raymond Farrin

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The Qur'an, Islam's holy book, is widely misunderstood because it is a difficult book to engage. The Qur'an is not written as a straightforward narrative like the Christian Gospels but is composed of discontinuous revelations that are often unclear in placing in an overall context. *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, aimed both at readers familiar with the Qur'an and at those opening it for the first time, differs from other books on the Qur'an in that it reveals the text's fundamental symmetrical organization. Moreover, through readings of key Qur'an chapters, Farrin shows how structure serves as a guide to interpretation. Indeed, one finds that the Qur'an's structure again and again points to universal messages of an ethical nature, rather than to messages whose application may be limited to a specific context. In addition, the book makes a contribution to Qur'anic studies by highlighting literary evidence indicating that the Qur'an was compiled by one author (in all probability, the Prophet Muhammad) and not by an official committee.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Farrin applies to the Qur'an critical tools such as ring composition to argue that the received text of the Qur'an is not a jumble of revelations collected in the years or decades after the death Muhammad, but a carefully composed text filled with deep structural parallels. Scholars will be challenged by this book to pay far more attention to the Qur'an as a whole instead of working on individual suras or even passages with no further context. Not every reader will likely become a “partisan of coherence” (as Farrin clearly is), but all will put down this book with greater respect for the structural unity of the Qur'an and the way this unity can serve as a guide for interpretation.”

—Martyn Smith, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Lawrence University and author of *Religion, Culture, and Sacred Space*

"Raymond Farrin conducts his research with brilliance and great clarity. Despite the arduous nature of the subject, this book reads with ease and pleasure. It avoids overly specialized language, relegating the most technical aspects to the notes and appendices. *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation* incontestably constitutes an important step in the research on the structure of the Qur'anic text." —**Michel Cuypers, author of *La Composition du Coran***

"*Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation* draws on social anthropology, literary analysis, and a wide reading of predecessors and contemporaries to offer an engagingly readable account of how structure relates to content in Islam's key text. Simultaneously emphatic and critical, Farrin's new book invites readers to understand the Qur'an from a fresh perspective." —**Dale F. Eickelman, Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations, Dartmouth College**

About the Author

Raymond Farrin is an associate professor of Arabic at the American University of Kuwait. He studied Arabic in Cairo and received a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. He is author of *Abundance from the Desert: Classical Arabic Poetry* (Syracuse UP, 2011).

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As we have observed previously in various chapters, so we find in this system a connection between the beginning, the middle, and the end, as well as an emphasis on a universal message in the center. The connection involves making a spiritual journey to the religion's core. The pilgrimage to Mecca, a key theme in the first and last group, figures prominently in Chapters 22-24 (these, by the way, have the titles The Pilgrimage, The Believers, and Light). Just as praying in the direction of Mecca unifies the believers, so does making the pilgrimage to Mecca bring them together. The middle of this system promotes unity among Muslims and highlights a common center.

But like Chapter 2, which states that other religious communities have their own prayer directions, and that “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God”(2:148; 2:115), Chapter 22 affirms that God has appointed rites for every religious community (v. 34). Moreover, for Muslims, clearly it is not the sacrificial rite itself of slaughtering a ram that matters to God—by which they commemorate Abraham's willingness to offer his

own son—but their piety in carrying it out (v. 37). Above and beyond unity, therefore, the middle of this system stresses belief in God, obedience to Him. And true belief in God, such as that held by pious Muslims, transcends communal boundaries: included among those who will attain salvation for their faith, evidently, are Jews, Christians, Sabians, and Magians (22:17). [Endnote: Magians, i.e. Zoroastrians. As noted above, the Sabians were probably a Manichean community.]

In Chapter 24 as well, one finds a striking affirmation of religious pluralism. The celebrated Light Verse (35) states that God's light is neither of east or west. It shines, as we read in the next verse, in houses of worship, ones He has permitted to be raised and wherein His name is mentioned. By comparing 22:40, which refers to monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques wherein God's name is mentioned often, with this verse directly following the Light Verse, it seems evident that a non-restrictive meaning for houses is intended in Light (the two verses, 22:40-41, in fact, compare closely to 24:36-37). Furthermore, the term itself, "houses," has a general connotation, unlike the specific terms mentioned in The Pilgrimage. God's light, therefore, shines in houses of worship of various denominations. In the Qur'an, as we see once more, pluralism is structurally emphasized.

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