

Structural Coherence in the Qur'an: How to See the Connections

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Ever since the Qur'an was first translated into Latin by Robert of Ketton in 1143 and, from that time onwards, many Western readers have voiced criticisms of the Qur'an, both its subject matter and the structure of its material. Riccoldo da Monte Croce (d. 1320), for instance, described the Qur'an as lacking in order: proceeding from "true propositions to things unrelated."¹ In the 19th century, Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881) famously characterized the Qur'an as "a wearisome confused jumble."² Within the 20th century, Richard Bell (d. 1952), as will be seen below, found much of the material of the Qur'an to be unrelated, and writes of its "grammatical unevenness and interruptions of sense."³

The road ahead is still very long. In recent times, Angelika Neuwirth's 1981 study of the structure of Meccan surahs has frequently been referred to by other scholars:⁴ Neal

¹ See Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1960), 81, quoting Riccoldo da Monte Croce, *Disputations*.

² Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966, originally published London: James Fraser, 1841).

³ E.g., Richard Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur'an* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1991), vol.1, xx, but see also the chapter on the language and style of the Qur'an in William Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an: Completely Revised and Enlarged by W. Montgomery Watt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), and Richard Bell, *The Qur'an Translated* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937). The commentary was published posthumously, in 1991, from notes made by Bell during his lifetime. In the Editors' Introduction, Bosworth and Richardson state that "it is unclear when he gave up work on the commentary, although this must obviously have been before his death in 1952." Bell, *Commentary*, xvi.

⁴ Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981).

Robinson, for instance,⁵ and Alan Jones,⁶ both cite it extensively in their own work. The structure of Medinan surahs has also attracted the attention of many researchers, among them Hamiduddin Farahi (d. 1930),⁷ Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997),⁸ Mustansir Mir,⁹ Michel Cuypers,¹⁰ Raymond Farrin,¹¹ Mathias Zahniser,¹² Carl Ernst,¹³ Salwa El-Awa,¹⁴ Nevin Reda,¹⁵ and others.¹⁶ Some of these scholars focus on identifying surah divisions, and

⁵ Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

⁶ Alan Jones, *The Qur'an* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007).

⁷ Hamiduddin Farahi, *Exordium to Coherence in the Qur'an*, trans. Tariq Mahmood Hashmi (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2013).

⁸ Amin Ahsan Islahi, *Taddabur-i Qur'ān: Muqaddimah va Tafāsir-i Mawlāna Amīn Aḥṣan Islāhī* (Delhi: World Islamic Publications, 1979–).

⁹ See, for instance, Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986).

¹⁰ Thus, for example, Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis*, trans. Jerry Ryan (USA: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

¹¹ E.g., Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2014).

¹² A.H. Mathias Zahniser, "The Word of God and the Apostleship of 'Īsā: A Narrative Analysis of Āl 'Imrān (3):33–62," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37:1 (1991); idem, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: al-Baqara and al-Nisā'," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Richmond: Curzon, 2000).

¹³ Carl Ernst, *How to Read the Qur'an: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Salwa M. El-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'an: Relevance, Coherence and Structure* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵ Nevin Reda, *The Al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ See for example a number of articles, published in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, by Neal Robinson, Marianna Klar, and Nicolai Sinai. See also M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *Exploring the Qur'an: Context and Impact* (London: IB Tauris, 2017) especially Chapter 8, "Coherent Style: How to Read the Qur'an."

investigating surah structure, which is in itself useful. In spite of a number of studies produced on surah structure, however, the notion of a lack of connection between consecutive parts still persists, in both scholarly and general writing. In a recent publication, for example, Garry Wills described the situation as follows: “[The Qur’an] is a series of disjunct revelations made to Muhammad.”¹⁷ Alan Jones, meanwhile, introduces Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (Q 33) with the statement: “There is an abrupt transition to a series of pieces.”¹⁸

I would argue that the difficulty resides in the fact that much of recent scholarly discussion has concentrated on form, without going into the connections between the divisions they have observed. Form is important of course, but the Qur’an states that its primary concern is *hudan* (“guidance”; Q 2:2). The Qur’an also describes itself as *bashīran wa-nadhīran* (“giving good news and warning”; Q 41:4). However, the Qur’an is designed above all to create an impact on human beings (Q 39:23):¹⁹

[it] causes the skins of those in awe of their Lord to quiver (*taqsha ‘irru minhu*). Then their skins and their hearts soften (*thumma talīnu julūduhum wa-qulūbuhum*) at the mention of God: such is God’s guidance ...

In order to achieve this purpose, the Qur’an, in presenting its material, sometimes departs from grammatical form. This can be witnessed, for example, when it exhibits *iltifāt*. At other times, as will be seen in many examples provided below, the Qur’an varies its sentence structures and patterns. Much Qur’anic analysis and study does not seem to give sufficient regard to this, the very soul of the Qur’an, which gives it impact on the readers.

The present essay will deal with a number of passages, drawn from different parts of the Qur’an, where it might initially seem that there is no connection between consecutive verses. If one examines these passages according to the Qur’an’s own style, however, they

¹⁷ Garry Wills, *What the Qur’an Meant and Why It Matters* (New York: Penguin Viking, 2017), 5.

¹⁸ Jones, *The Qur’an*, 383. Jones does not seem to realise that, after the interruption, the surah returns to the original theme.

¹⁹ In light of the above, it is not surprising that Karen Bauer, in a recent article, was able to state: “In the field of Qur’anic Studies ... to my knowledge, nobody has undertaken a study of emotions as such.” Karen Bauer, “Emotions in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 19:2 (2017), 1.

turn out to be connected. They show, moreover, the interweaving of Qur’anic teachings. In all of the examples supplied below, the normal “expected” patterns of composition are interrupted and there is an apparent change, either of topic or sentence structure, before the original pattern is resumed. The “inserted” material departs from the “expected” pattern in two main ways. The first type, “A Change of Topic,” is the more common of the two types and seems to present readers with the most difficulties. Bell’s opinion, for example, as will be discussed below, that Q 2:229 is unrelated to the preceding verse because it treats a different subject, is likely to be shared by other readers, seeing that two different subjects are presented in adjacent position, without the provision of any linking phrase or cohesive device. We shall see that, on examining the passage carefully in the light of Qur’anic style, the two verses are in fact strongly related to one other. The second type, “Departures from Uniform Sentence Patterns and Rhyme,” occurs where shifts in sentence structure and rhyme have led some readers to conclude that material was added later.²⁰ As will be demonstrated below, this occurs when there has been a failure to investigate the inherent relationship between adjacent parts of the text.

In all the examples discussed below, the change in topic or structure will be indicated via the use of **bold font**.

Type 1. A Change of Topic

The following examples are all instances where Bell concluded that there was a lack of connection between these particular verses and those verses that immediately precede and follow them. The case of Bell remains very significant because Qur’anic studies was his main specialization, and his introduction to the Qur’an, his translation, and his commentary are still consulted and quoted, in scholarly circles at least. Indeed, Bell remains, to date, the single British-born scholar who has done the most work in examining the structure of the Qur’an from beginning to end. His main theory—that the Qur’an’s distinctive style might be the result of confusion that arose when compilers put the Qur’an together, that “sheets and parts of sheets might have been covered with writing on both sides and later read consecutively”²¹—was not always accepted by other scholars. Thus for example Arthur

²⁰ See for example Bell’s introduction to Sūrat al-Mā’idah (Q 5). Bell, *The Qur’an Translated*, 92

²¹ Bell, *Commentary*, xx.

Arberry, who remarked of Bell’s translation: “... it is virtually unreadable.”²² Bell’s efforts are nonetheless enlightening, inasmuch as they disclose the methodological basis from which he and many subsequent scholars have reached their conclusions about the structure of Qur’anic surahs.

In all, we will discuss twenty examples falling under four functional categories: “Suspension Introducing a New Topic in order to Secure Obedience” (8 examples); “Suspension to Highlight an Important Point” (5 examples); “Suspension Used to Give Reassurance” (4 examples) and “Suspension used to make an urgent explanation” (3 examples). This is not a complete survey of the Qur’an by any means, but the twenty examples investigated below will serve to illustrate that, when such alleged lacks of connection occur, an examination of the material in context makes it apparent that the “different” topic is actually employed in order to serve the original subject. This device can be termed *istikhdām*: employing material for one purpose or another.

A. *Suspension in order to Secure Obedience (8 examples)*

Example A1. Q 2:237–41

Bell wrote that: “Vv. 239ff [of the Flügel system, corresponding to vv. 238ff of the Cairo edition] have no connection with the context. They seem designed for those in some military expedition.”²³ This is, however, a supposition. I would argue that, on the contrary, these verses have a very strong and effective connection with their context. (Please note, again, that the alleged change in topic or structure has been indicated via the use of **bold font**.)

²³⁷ If you divorce wives (*wa-in ṭallaqtumūhunna*) before consummating the marriage but after fixing a bride-gift for them, then give them half of what you had previously fixed, unless they waive [their right], or unless the one who holds the marriage tie waives [his right]. Waiving [your right] is nearer to godliness, so do not forget to be generous towards one another (*lā tansaw al-faḍl*)

²² Marianna Klar, meanwhile, states: “Nöldeke’s and Bell’s paradigm, ... in which disparate scraps were spliced together in an almost random order, is clearly untenable.” See Marianna Klar, “Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure: Combining Synchronicity with Diachronicity in *Sūrat al-Baqara*. Part Two,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017), 84.

²³ Bell, *Commentary*, 150.

baynakum): God sees what you do. ²³⁸ **Take care to do your prayers (*ḥāfiẓū ‘alā l-ṣalawāt*), praying in the best way, and stand before God in devotion.** ²³⁹ **If you are in danger (*in khiftum*), pray when you are out on foot or riding; when you are safe again (*idhā amintum*), remember God, for He has taught you what you did not know.** ²⁴⁰ If any of you die (*wa-lladhīna yutawaffawna minkum*) and leave widows, make a bequest for them: a year’s maintenance and no expulsion from their homes [for that time]. But if they leave of their own accord you will not be blamed for what they may reasonably choose to do with themselves: God has the power to decide. ²⁴¹ Divorced women shall also have such maintenance as is considered fair: this is a duty for those who are mindful of God.

Here, the original theme of vv. 226–37 of Sūrat al-Baqarah (Q 2) is “divorce and widowhood.” The topic of “prayer and danger” is introduced, briefly, in vv. 238–39. Subsequent to this, the “divorce and widowhood” theme is then resumed: v. 240 marks the onset of a number of verses addressing this theme. Far from being a diversion, however, the verses on “prayer and danger” are introduced precisely in order to enable believers to obey the teachings on divorce. They urge the believers to stop, in the middle of bitterness, and perform the prayer. They can then come back in a better mood when they are more likely to obey the instruction to be magnanimous.

As seen in the Qur’an, prayer is effective in times of war. When Ṭālūt and his forces go out to meet Jālūt in battle, for instance (vv. 249–51), they pray (*qālū*), “Lord (*rabbanā*), pour patience upon us, make us stand firm, and help us against the disbelievers,” and go on to defeat the enemy, with God’s permission. It can therefore be seen that prayer calms people in battle. However, prayer also calms people in bitter disputes like divorce. The Qur’an urges people in general terms to “seek assistance in patience and prayer (*ista’īnū bi-l-ṣabri wa-l-ṣalāt*)” (v. 153). In fact, prayer is so important in enabling other commands to be obeyed that it comes at the very beginning of lists describing the actions of believers, for instance Q 23:1–11 (*qad aflaha l-mu’minūna lladhīna hum fī ṣalātihim khāshī’ūn ...*) and Q 70:22–35 (*illā l-muṣallīna lladhīna hum ‘alā ṣalātihim dā’imūn ...*). Prayer comes first in such lists precisely because it enables believers to follow subsequent instructions. In rural Egypt, villagers would normally set a time in the afternoon in order to settle disputes, but first they would pray the *‘asr* prayer. The underlying logic was that this initial act of prayer put the villagers in a better frame of mind for settling disputes.

So, in this case, the new topic, far from having no connection with the verses that surround it, as Bell claimed, is very strongly connected to its context. It is employed (*istikhdām*) as a very effective enabler of the Qur'an's teaching. To make the connection explicit, one might expect a phrase such as "in order to enable yourselves to obey the teaching, keep up the prayer." However, the necessity for a linking phrase is dispensed with by two devices:

- 1) adjacency (*tajawwur*), which enables the listener to make the imaginative leap to perceive the link, and
- 2) intratextual associations with what the Qur'an says in other places (*taḍāfur*), which inform the listener that prayer is an enabler that facilitates obedience to God's instructions.

Moreover, keeping the passage as it is and not adding a link makes it quotable and applicable to many different situations. Indeed, Muslims do quote such independent statements in this way.

Example A2. Q 5:5–7

In this second example, the subject is again changed in order to secure obedience. Sūrat al-Mā'idah (Q 5) starts by reminding the faithful to fulfil their pledges with regard to Hajj rituals and food. After listing forbidden foods, it moves on to refer to lawful and forbidden sexual relations, with Muslim women and with women of the People of the Book. To enable Muslims to observe this teaching, the theme of the prayer is brought in but, because of the context of mentioning unclean food and sexual relations, this new teaching is introduced together with cleansing oneself for the prayer, making the teaching of cleansing part of perfecting God's grace, just as God made cleanliness of food part of His grace in v. 3. The Qur'an goes on to resume the theme of remembering God's grace and the pledges with which the believers were bound (see v. 1), reminding them again in v. 11 of how God restrained the hands of their enemies when they intended to attack them.

⁵ Today all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them. So are chaste, believing, women as well as chaste women of the people who were given the Scripture before you, as long as you have given them their bride-gifts and

married them, not taken them as lovers or secret mistresses. The deeds of anyone who rejects [the obligations of] faith will come to nothing, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers. ⁶ **You who believe, when you are about to pray (*idhā qumtum ilā l-ṣalāti*), wash (*fa-ghsilū*) your faces and your hands and arms up to the elbows, wipe your heads, wash your feet up to the ankles and, if required (*wa-in kuntum junuban*), wash your whole body (*fa-ṭṭaharū*). If any of you is sick or on a journey, or has just relieved himself, or had intimate contact with a woman, and can find no water, then take some clean sand and wipe your face and hands with it. God does not wish to place any burden on you; He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you, so that you may be thankful.** ⁷ Remember God's blessing on you and the pledge with which you were bound ...

It should be noted that prayer, and the regulations that surround it, are similarly employed in Q 4:43 to enable obedience to the surrounding teachings condemning stinginess, discouraging others from paying, and showing off:

You who believe, do not come anywhere near prayer (*lā taqrabū ṣ-ṣalāta*) ... if you are in a state of major ritual impurity (*junuban*) ... not until you have bathed (*hattā taghtasilū*). If any one of you is sick or on a journey, or has just relieved himself, or had intimate contact with a woman

There are a number of similarities between the two Qur'anic passages: in both, cleanliness for the prayer is emphasized. Q 4:43 addresses immoral behavior, on this occasion the believers are ordered not to approach prayer when they are drunk or unclean. The above cited passage from Sūrat al-Mā'idah, meanwhile, brings in the prayer to enable obedience to the teachings on food and sexual relations. In both of these passages, as in the first example, the two topics are independent but connected: there is *istikhdām* of prayer to secure obedience in spite of the fact that there is no connecting linguistic device to indicate this.

Example A3. Q 5:3

This long verse, also from Sūrat al-Mā'idah, begins by listing ten forbidden types of food, and closes with reassurance that, should a believer be forced by necessity to eat any of these forbidden foods, he or she will not be held at fault. In between these two sections, we find an

admonition, directed to the wider community, not to fear the disbelievers (*lā takhshūhum*), as they had given up hope of overcoming Islam after trying to dissuade the believers from obeying the laws on food (as explained in Q 6:121). The Qur'an goes on to remind the believers that God has perfected their religion for them, completed His favor on them and chosen Islam to be their religion, so the laws on food are final and there is no going back on them. This reinforces the prohibition of unlawful food in the strongest way: it is by no means extraneous to the context.

³ You are forbidden (*ḥurimat 'alaykum*) to eat carrion; blood; pig's meat; any animal over which any name other than God's has been invoked (*wa-mā uḥilla li-ghayri llāhi bihi*); any animal strangled, or victim of a violent blow or a fall, or gored or savaged by a beast of prey, unless you still slaughter it [in the correct manner]; or anything sacrificed on idolatrous altars (*wa-mā dhubiḥa 'alā l-nuṣubi*). You are also forbidden to allot shares [of meat] by drawing marked arrows (*wa-an tastaqsimū bi-l-azlāmi*)—a heinous practice (*dhālikum fīsqun*)! **Today the disbelievers have lost all hope that you will give up your religion. Do not fear them: fear Me. Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion *islām* [total devotion to God],** but if any of you is forced by hunger to eat such forbidden food, with no intention of doing wrong, then God is most forgiving and merciful.

The topic of forbidden food is changed in this segment of text, but, despite the fact that Bell²⁴ and others are quick to say, “This was added later,” presumably on the basis of the switch of subject, this is not necessarily a strong basis for such a conclusion. The relevant question is: “Is it connected to the preceding material or not?” The answer undoubtedly is that it reinforces the prohibition on unlawful food and gives strong reasons to obey the teaching.

Example A4. Q 2:254–61

Sūrat al-Baqarah (Q 2) deals with many topics, but near the end, at vv. 254–84, it urges people to spend from their wealth in the cause of God and deals with related financial matters.

²⁴ See above note.

²⁵⁴ You who believe, give from what We have provided for you, before the Day comes when there is no bargaining, no friendship, and no intercession. It is the disbelievers who are wrong. ²⁵⁵ **God: there is no god but Him, the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. All that is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to Him. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not comprehend any of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth; it does not weary Him to preserve them both. He is the Most High, the Tremendous ...** ²⁶¹ Those who spend their wealth in God's cause are like grains of corn that produce seven ears, each bearing a hundred grains. God gives multiple increase to whoever He wishes: He is limitless and all knowing.

The Qur'an, in this surah as in others, uses strong means of persuasion to induce people to part with their wealth. This can be seen in the powerful imagery used from v. 261 onwards, but it is also seen in the change of topic from vv. 255–60. The Throne Verse (v. 255) provides a compelling incentive to spend for God's sake, and it is followed by verses illustrating God's support for the faithful, His knowledge, and His ability to bring about the resurrection of the dead. This ability relates to the recommendation, in v. 254, to "spend, before a day comes when" From v. 261 onwards, the surah's discussion of spending resumes. On this occasion, the suspension between vv. 254 and 261 is used (*istikhdām*) to reinforce the teaching of giving in charity. As usual, the suspending passages are independent and quotable but still connected.

Example A5. Q 33:1–28

Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (Q 33) deals with matters within the Muslim family, and it opens by addressing an important issue: the idea that people should name adopted children after their real fathers, rather than their adoptive fathers. It seems clear that this was an idea that ran counter to custom and was difficult for the Arabs of the time to accept. The Qur'an uses very strong imagery here, especially in v. 4:

¹ Prophet, be mindful of God and do not give in to the disbelievers and the hypocrites: God has the power to decide. ² Follow what your Lord reveals to

you: God is well aware of all your actions. ³ Put your trust in God: God is enough to trust. ⁴ God does not put two hearts within a man's breast. He does not turn the wives you reject and liken to your mothers' backs into your real mothers; nor does He make your adopted sons into real sons. These are only words from your mouths, while God speaks the truth and guides people to the right path. ⁵ Name your adopted sons after their real fathers: this is more equitable in God's eyes—if you do not know who their fathers are [they are your] “brothers-in-religion” and protégés. You will not be blamed if you make a mistake, only for what your hearts deliberately intend; God is most forgiving and merciful. ⁶ The Prophet is more caring towards the believers than they are themselves, while his wives are their mothers. In God's Scripture, blood-relatives have a stronger claim than other believers and emigrants, though you may still bestow gifts on your friends. All this is written in the Scripture.

In addition to this argument, which is there in order to persuade believers to accept this and other teachings of the surah, the opening of Sūrat al-Aḥzāb reminds the believers how God saved them at a time when the confederated tribes came to wipe them out in Medina. The surah changes to this topic at v. 9.

⁹ You who believe, remember God's goodness to you when mighty armies massed against you: We sent a violent wind and invisible forces against them. God sees all that you do. ¹⁰ They massed against you from above and below; your eyes rolled [with fear], your hearts rose into your throats, and you thought [ill] thoughts of God. ¹¹ There the believers were sorely tested and deeply shaken: ... ²⁷ ... God has power to do everything. ²⁸ Prophet, tell your wives...

When this reminder has been carried through to its end, at the close of v. 27, the surah resumes the original pattern of addressing the Prophet in connection with the behavior of his wives. It then continues to alternate between addressing the Prophet and addressing the believers until the end of the surah. The *ahzāb* incident is clearly a very powerful enabler of obedience. The main teaching of the surah, however, has nothing to do with that particular incident. It uses it as an “aside” to remind believers of God's power and favor.

Employing the idea of saving Muslims from an enemy attack is used elsewhere in the Qur'an to enable the faithful to obey Qur'anic teachings in context. Thus, for example, Q 2:7, "So remember God's blessing on you and the pledge with which you were bound when you said, 'We hear and we obey,'" and Q 2:11, "You who believe, remember God's blessing on you when a certain people were about to raise their hands against you and He restrained them."

Example A6. Q 4:11–19

Sūrat al-Nisā' (Q 4) begins by addressing issues of inheritance and the shares given to rightful heirs and goes on to emphasize that these are boundaries set by God, warning against these boundaries being overstepped. At v. 15 there is then a shift to deal with adultery,²⁵ before the surah turns to the pre-Islamic custom of relatives inheriting widows,²⁶ and other legal matters. Bell describes vv. 15–18 as having "no connection with the context; they deal with indecent conduct, not necessarily adultery." The explanation Bell provides for their placement in Sūrat al-Nisā' is that "probably the passage owes its presence here to the back of it having been used for the writing of vv. 23–25 [of the Flügel system, corresponding to vv. 15–18 of the Cairo edition]."²⁷ As will become apparent below, however, this topic has very strong connections to both the matter of inheritance, which precedes it, and that of marital relationships, which follows.

¹¹ Concerning your children, God commands you that a son should have the equivalent share of two daughters ... ¹³ These are the bounds set by God: God will admit those who obey Him and His Messenger to Gardens graced with flowing streams, and there they will stay—that is the supreme triumph! ¹⁴ But those who disobey God and His Messenger and overstep His limits will be consigned by God to the Fire, and there they will stay—a humiliating torment awaits them! ¹⁵ **If any of your women commit a lewd act, call four witnesses from among you, then, if they testify to their guilt, keep the women at home**

²⁵ See Abdel Haleem, *Exploring the Qur'an*, 96. This passage is discussed, in detail, in Abdel Haleem, *Exploring the Qur'an*, 89ff.

²⁶ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, also known as *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb* (16 vols. Beirut, n.d.), vol. 5, part 10: 10–11.

²⁷ Bell, *Commentary*, vol. 1: 111.

until death comes to them or until God shows them another way. ¹⁶If any two of you commit a lewd act, punish them both; if they repent and mend their ways, leave them alone ... ¹⁹ You who believe, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will ...

What we have here is a case of *istikhdām*. By mentioning illicit relationships, the passage emphasizes obedience to God's commands regarding marital relations and regarding inheritance. The Qur'an does not need to explain the link between vv. 11–14 and vv. 15–18 by means of any sort of introductory phrase: the link can be deduced by adjacency (*tajawwur*) and by contrast. The absence of any linking phrase, moreover, makes the sentence concise, quotable, and memorable.

Example A7. Q 8:1-5

The final two examples within this category (“Suspension Introducing a New Topic in order to Secure Obedience”) work specifically in order to reinforce obedience against bad behavior. The first example, a passage from Sūrat al-Anfāl (Q 8), occurs within a discussion of the Battle of Badr.

¹ They ask you, Prophet, about the distribution of the battle gains. Say: “This is a matter for God and His Messenger.” **So be mindful of God, and put things right among yourselves. Obey God and His Messenger, if you are true believers: ² true believers are those whose hearts tremble with awe when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when His revelations are recited to them, who put their trust in their Lord, ³ who keep up the prayer and give to others out of what We provide for them. ⁴ Those are the ones who truly believe. They have high standing with their Lord, forgiveness, and generous provision ... ⁵ Just as God has brought you out from your house, in truth ...**

At the end of the Battle of Badr, some Muslims asked the Prophet about the distribution of booty. They had clearly been arguing among themselves, so instead of giving them the answer, the Qur'an states sharply that this is a matter for God and His Messenger. It then suspends this discourse with a passage that gives instructions to the Muslims as to how they should behave as true believers. The explanation for why this was a matter for God and His Messenger is then resumed in vv. 5–6, where the Qur'an declares that it was God who

brought the Prophet out to meet the Muslims' enemies, despite the fact that the believers were very reluctant to fight. The succeeding verses show, moreover, that it was God and His angels who won the battle, and not the Muslim forces.

In this case, neither Nöldeke nor Bell saw the connection between the words *kamā akhrajaka rabbuka* ("Just as God has brought you out from your house," v. 5) and *al-anfālu li-llāhi wa-l-rasūli* ("This is a matter for God and His Messenger," v. 1) at the beginning of the surah, seeing only that the answer to how the booty was to be distributed comes much later, in v. 41.²⁸ The intervening verses, however, deal with other matters the community should bear in mind *before* their question is answered. It is thus the Qur'an's habit to prioritize certain urgent issues even at the expense of formal patterns of structuring.

Example A8. Q 36:41–68

Although this was not commented on by either Nöldeke or Bell, Sūrat Yā Sīn (Q 36) provides another example of suspension, and creates a useful contextual foil for the preceding discussion. Verses 33–40 of the surah give arguments for the Resurrection, through analogies with the death and revivification of the land, the alternation of night and day, and the passage of the moon and the sun. The Qur'an, at this point, also observes that God has the power to wreck ships, but chooses to save people by His mercy.²⁹ Then, in a passage that runs from vv. 45–48, the disbelievers in the audience are depicted as jeering at the Qur'an, despite God's mercy to them, as ridiculing its insistence that they should give in charity, and as questioning the Resurrection altogether.³⁰

⁴¹ Another sign for them is that We carried their seed in the laden Ark, ⁴² and We have made similar things for them to ride in. ⁴³ If We will, We can drown them, and there is no one to help them: they cannot be saved. ⁴⁴ Only by Our mercy can they be reprieved to enjoy life for a while. ⁴⁵ **Yet when they are told, "Beware of what lies before and behind you, so that you may be given mercy,"** ⁴⁶ **they ignore every single sign that comes to them from their Lord,** ⁴⁷ **and when**

²⁸ Theodor Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1910), 18; Bell, *Commentary*, vol. 1: 270.

²⁹ Elsewhere, the Qur'an shows that once they are safe again on land, the disbelievers forget God. Compare Q 10:22–24; Q 17:66–69.

³⁰ See also Q 10:23, Q 31:32, Q 39:8, and many other verses.

they are told, “Give to others out of what God has provided for you,” the disbelievers say to the believers, “Why should we feed those that God could feed if He wanted? You must be deeply misguided.”⁴⁸ And they say, “When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say is true?” ...⁶⁵... their hands and feet will tell us what they have done.⁶⁶ If We will, We take away their sight. They struggle to find the path, but how can they see it?⁶⁷ If We will, We paralyze them where they stand, so that they cannot move forward or backward.⁶⁸ If We extend anyone’s life, We reverse his development. Do they not use their reason?

Such examples of misbehavior after being saved are frequently found in the Qur’an, for example at Q 10:23 or at Q 31:32, and in all of these Qur’anic cases, God says He will deal with the disbelievers. Accordingly, in Sūrat Yā Sīn, the description of the disbelievers’ misconduct is followed by a scene in which the disbelievers are shown what will happen when the final day comes. Although the subsequent discussion of God’s power in Q 36:66 resumes the threat described in Q 36:43, and in very similar terms (“If We will, We take away their sight ...”), the intervening topic is very much connected to proving the Resurrection, the main theme of the surah. Verses 45–65 may be independent, but they are not alien to the main thrust of the discussion: arguments of God’s power to resurrect people.

B. Suspension to Highlight an Important Point (5 examples)

Example B1. Q 2:187–89

This cluster of verses from Sūrat al-Baqarah, containing two sections described by Bell as “quite detached,” inform the believers that, during the nights of the Ramadan fast, they are allowed to eat, drink, and have marital relations until dawn. Within this spirit of generous allowance during the night-time, and self-restraint during the day-time, the Qur’an takes the opportunity to restrain the believers from consuming property wrongfully, or from using it sinfully and knowingly to bribe judges in order to do this. After an encouragement to *kulū wa-shrabū* (“eat and drink”) comes the contrasting prohibition *lā ta’kulū* (“do not eat”).³¹

³¹ For a discussion of the play on *kulū wa-shrabū* in Sūrat al-Baqarah see Marianna Klar, “Through the Lens of the Adam Narrative: A Reconsideration of Surat al-Baqara,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015).

¹⁸⁷You [believers] are permitted to lie with your wives during the night of the fast: they are [close] as garments to you, as you are to them. God was aware (*'alima llāhu*) that you were betraying yourselves, so He turned to you in mercy and pardoned you: now you can lie with them—seek what God has ordained for you—eat and drink (*wa-kulū wa-shrabū*) until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct from the black. Then fast until nightfall. Do not lie with them during the nights of your devotional retreat in the mosques: these are the bounds set by God (*tilka ḥudūdu llāhi*), so do not go near them. In this way God makes His messages clear to people, that they may guard themselves against doing wrong.

¹⁸⁸ **Do not eat up (*wa-lā ta 'kulū*) each other's property wrongfully, nor use it to bribe judges, intending sinfully and knowingly (*wa-antum ta 'lamūn*) to eat up (*li-ta 'kulū*) parts of other people's property.** ¹⁸⁹ They ask you [Prophet] about crescent moons. Say, 'They show the times appointed for people, and for the pilgrimage.'

In this example, the piety that the believing community obtains from fasting, enabling a degree of licit consumption, is used as a context for the prohibition of other, wrongful consumption. The Qur'an takes the chance to highlight this important teaching.

Different teachings of the Qur'an support each other (*ta 'āduḍ*). Bell declares both v. 188 and v. 189 to be "detached," citing context as his reason: he observes that v. 188 "refers to gambling and bribery," while v. 189 "refers to the new moon." However, v. 188 does not refer to gambling—this is speculation on Bell's part—but to wrongful consumption, in the context of a discussion of rightful consumption. Verse 189, meanwhile, exhibits a logical shift in focus from Ramadan, the observation of which is tied to the appearance of the new moon, to the new moon itself, which shows "the times appointed for people, and for the pilgrimage."

Example B2. Q 24:32–33

The theme of this short passage from Sūrat al-Nūr (Q 24) is the enabling of chastity. The Qur'an first states that the unmarried people of the community, both free people and slaves, should be given in wedlock (v. 32). The chastity of slave girls is also protected by the command to their masters not to force them into prostitution (v. 33). In between the two flanks of this discussion, the Qur'an builds on its recommendation that slaves be ethically treated by legislating that slaves who seek to have a contract of manumission should be

allowed to do so, and that their masters should help pay for their freedom, if they are deserving.

³² Marry off the single among you, and those of your male and female slaves who are fit [for marriage]. If they are poor, God will provide for them from His bounty: God's bounty is infinite and He is all knowing. ³³ Those who are unable to marry should keep chaste until God gives them enough out of His bounty. **If any of your slaves wish to pay for their freedom, make a contract with them (*kātibūhum*) accordingly, if you know they have good in them, and give them some of the wealth God has given you.** Do not force your slave-girls into prostitution, when they themselves wish to remain honorable, in your quest for the short-term gains of this world, although, if they are forced, God will be forgiving and merciful [to them].

It is clear from other verses in the Qur'an that the freeing of slaves is encouraged repeatedly through different means, whether through charity (Q 90:13), or as expiation for various misdeeds (Q 4:92, Q 5:89, Q 38:3). Here this theme is brought into the discussion of chastity, because if a slave is freed he can decide for himself and be in a position to get married without anyone else's help. The suspension in this example is used to extend the original teaching further by showing more generosity. In effect, the verse is saying: "While you are being good in enabling your slaves to get married, be even better by enabling them to become free."

In our discussion of Q 24:33, it is important to refer to Patricia Crone's views. In a 1994 publication, Crone argued that Muslim commentators had misunderstood this verse, and that *alladhīna yabtaghūna l-kitāb mimmā malakat aymānukum* (widely accepted to mean "those of your slaves who seek to have a contract of manumission") should in fact be read as a reference to *kitāb* as "marriage contract."³² Crone is clearly incorrect, however, because the marrying off of slaves has already been mentioned in the verse, followed by the phrase "God will provide for them from His bounty." The reference to manumission, meanwhile, is paired with the statement: "Give them some of the wealth God has given you." The term *al-kitāb*,

³² Patricia Crone, "Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qur'an," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994).

moreover, occurs in the Qur'an in ten different meanings,³³ but the Arabic verb *kātaba* is only ever used for corresponding or for this type of contract just mentioned; it is never employed in the sense of marriage contract. The verb used for marriage contracts is *ankiha*, as can be seen at the beginning of v. 32.

If we were to accept Crone's view there would be no suspension here. In my view, however, the mention of *mukātabah* in v. 33 is utilized precisely in order to suspend the discussion on chastity, in order to encourage people further to do even more good. In the Qur'an here, in the Hadith and the Fiqh, *kātaba* does have the meaning, "to have a contract of manumission," and it is recommended that the owner helps the slave. If the contract is for ten instalments, for instance, it is recommended that the owner waives the remainder. Thus God helps in the first case ("God will provide for them from His bounty") but the owner helps in the second ("Give them some of the wealth God has given you").

Example B3. Q 55:7–10

As in many other incidences, Bell views vv. 8–9 as "almost certainly a later addition" within the opening section of Sūrat al-Raḥmān (Q 55).³⁴ Bell's confusion presumably arose because these verses are horatory, unlike the preceding and following descriptive verses. There is, however, a powerful conceptual connection between vv. 8–9 and the surrounding verses.

⁷ He has raised up the sky. **He has set the balance** ⁸ **so that you may not exceed in the balance:** ⁹ **weigh with justice and do not fall short in the balance.** ¹⁰ He set down the Earth for His creatures ...

The pattern of composition here is one in which a statement about God's power is followed by a command. Again, this is an instance of *istikhdām*: between describing God's power in raising the sky and setting down the earth, the Qur'an seizes the chance to show that

³³ For a discussion of this term see Tammām Ḥassān, *al-Bayān fi rawā'ī al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1993), 429. It should also be noted that in Fiqh books there is a special chapter on freeing slaves, and a subsection of that is *mukātabah* (manumission). See e.g. al-Qādī Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad al-Asbahānī (d. 480/1087), *Matn Abī Shujā'ah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ṣafā, n.d.), 63–64.

³⁴ Bell, *Commentary on the Qur'an*, vol. 2: 330 (vv. 7–8).

He does this in complete balance and urges people not to upset that balance either by excess or falling short. This is a theme that is emphasized in many places in the Qur'an.³⁵

Example B4. Q 23:1–5

In this example from Sūrat al-Mu'minūn (and the following excerpt from Sūrat al-Shūrā, Example B5), the Qur'an highlights an important item by interrupting a normally inseparable pair. The concepts of "prayer" (*ṣalāt*) and "alms-giving" (*zakāt*) frequently occur side by side in the Qur'an. This can be seen, for example, in Q 22:41 "establish the prayer and pay the zakat (*aqāmū l-ṣalāta wa-ātawu l-zakāta*)." See also Q 22:78 and at many other junctures of the Qur'an.³⁶ Significantly, they follow each other in the list that gives the five pillars of Islam:³⁷

Islam has been built on five [pillars]: testifying that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, performing the prayers, paying the Zakah, making the pilgrimage to the House, and fasting in Ramadan.

There are only two Qur'anic cases in which "prayer" and "alms-giving" are separated: in Q 23:1–5 and Q 42:38. In both instances, the Qur'an does this in order to make an important point. The passage from Sūrat al-Mu'minūn reads as follows:

¹ The faithful have succeeded: ² those who pray humbly (*alladhīna hum fī ṣalāatihim khāshi'ūn*), ³ **who shun frivolity** (*wa-lladhīna hum 'ani l-laghwi mu'riḍūn*), ⁴ who pay the prescribed alms (*wa-lladhīna hum li-l-zakāti fā'ilūn*), ⁵ who guard their chastity (*wa-lladhīna hum li-furūjihim ḥāfiẓūn*) ...

³⁵ See, for example Q 15:19, Q 23:103, Q 25:67, Q 42:17, and Q 57:25.

³⁶ See, for example, Q 2:3.43.83, Q 8:3, Q 9:5.11, Q 14:31, Q 19:31, Q 22:41, and many other passages.

³⁷ Ezzedine Ibrahim and Denys Johnson Davies (trans.), *Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadith* (Damascus: Holy Koran Publishing House, 1977), 34 (no. 3).

The insertion at v. 3, “those who shun frivolity” (*wa-lladhīna hum ‘ani l-laghwi mu‘ridūn*) stresses the importance of such avoidance.³⁸ Indeed, avoidance of frivolous distractions works in two directions. It makes believers both more likely to perform the prayer and to pay zakat.

Example B5. Q 42:38

The second Qur’anic example where the concepts of “prayer” (*ṣalāt*) and “alms-giving” (*zakāt*) are interrupted occurs in a passage from Sūrat al-Shūrā (Q 42).

³⁸ [Those who] respond to their Lord (*wa-lladhīna stajābū li-rabbihim*); keep up the prayer (*wa-aqāmū ṣ-ṣalāta*); **conduct their affairs by mutual consultation** (*wa-amruhum shūrā baynahum*); give to others out of what We have provided for them (*wa-mimmā razaqnāhum yunfiqūn*) ...

The concept of conducting affairs by mutual consultation is highlighted by being inserted between these two pillars of Islam. Prayer is performed in congregation in mosques, believers pray together and discuss common matters together and they help the poor among them. Just as, in the preceding example, the importance of avoiding *laghw* was reinforced by the mention of prayers and zakat, here there is *istikhdām* of prayers and zakat in order to emphasize the importance of conducting affairs by consultation.

C. Suspension Used to Give Reassurance (4 examples)

In the previous examples we saw the use of suspension to secure obedience. The following examples show their use in giving reassurance either to the Prophet (two examples) or to the faithful (two examples).

Example C1. Q 75:7–20

Bell describes this short passage from Sūrat al-Qiyāmah (Q 75) as “an early scrap used for the insertion of vv. 13–15 [Flügel]” and “a private admonition to the Prophet,” concluding

³⁸ For this phenomenon, see s.v. “Unseemly words or actions,” *Dictionary of Qur’anic Vocabulary*, eds. Abdel Salām Hārūn et al. (2 vols. Cairo: Academy of the Arabic language, 1990), vol. 2: 1013.

that vv. 16–19 of Sūrat al-Qiyāmah “do not belong to the context.”³⁹ The passage in full reads as follows:

⁷ When eyes are dazzled ⁸ and the moon eclipsed, ⁹ when the sun and the moon are brought together, ¹⁰ on that Day man will say, “Where can I escape?”
¹¹ Truly, there is no refuge: ¹² they will all return to your Lord on that Day. ¹³ On that Day, man will be told what he put first and what he put last. ¹⁴ Truly, man is a clear witness against himself, ¹⁵ despite all the excuses he may put forward.
¹⁶ **[Prophet], do not rush your tongue in an attempt to hasten [your memorization of] the Revelation: ¹⁷ It is for Us to make sure of its safe collection and recitation. ¹⁸ When We have recited it, repeat the recitation ¹⁹ and it is up to Us to make it clear. ²⁰ Truly, you [people] love this fleeting world ...**

Bell’s statement does not seem to pay regard to the way the Qur’an was revealed, through the Angel Gabriel. The Prophet went through what is described as the “state of revelation” (*ḥālat al-wahy*), where he repeated God’s words back to the angel.⁴⁰ In the passage quoted, the Prophet was clearly moved by the quick succession of the description of the events on the Day and appears to have felt anxious that he might not keep up with the revelation, so he speeded up his recitation. The Qur’an at this point stops to reassure him that he need not do this, as God will ensure that he does catch it. Then the original theme is resumed. The topic change highlights how powerfully the Prophet felt the original descriptions of the events on the Day of Resurrection. The passage is independent, quotable, but strongly connected to its context.

Example C2. Q 20:108–114

There is a similar example to this in Sūrat Ṭāhā (Q 20). Again, the admonition to the Prophet follows a moving description of what will happen on the Day of Judgment. In this atmosphere, the Prophet was clearly concerned that he might not catch the precise words of

³⁹ Bell, *Commentary*, vol. 2: 461.

⁴⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, al-Kutub al-sitta* ed. Ṣāliḥ bin Abdulazīz Aal al-Sheikh, Dār us-Salām, Riyadh, 1st ed. 1999), “*Wahy*,” no. 3.

the revelation, and started to rush. Verses 113–114 were then delivered in order to reassure the Prophet, and in order to provide him with advice on how to manage his anxiety:

¹⁰⁸ On that Day, people will follow the summoner from whom there is no escape; every voice will be hushed for the Lord of Mercy; only whispers will be heard.

¹⁰⁹ On that Day, intercession will be useless except from those to whom the Lord of Mercy has granted permission and whose words He approves—¹¹⁰ He knows what is before and behind them, though they do not comprehend Him—¹¹¹ and [all] faces will be humbled before the Living, Ever Watchful One. Those burdened with evil deeds will despair ... ¹¹³ **We have sent the Qur’an down in the Arabic tongue and given all kinds of warnings in it, so that they may beware or it may make them take heed—** ¹¹⁴ **exalted be God, the One who is truly in control. [Prophet,] do not rush to recite before the revelation is fully complete but say, “Lord, increase my knowledge!”**

There is a hadith providing further context to this phenomenon. The Prophet, listening to Ibn Mas‘ūd reciting Q 4:41 (“What will they do when We bring a witness from each community, with you [Muḥammad] as a witness against these people?”) asked him to stop the reading. When he stopped, Ibn Mas‘ūd saw the Prophet weeping.⁴¹

Example C3. Q 2:285–86

The following two examples of a suspension in Qur’anic topic illustrate how the Qur’an breaks its compositional pattern in order to provide reassurance to the faithful. In vv. 285–86 of Sūrat al-Baqarah (Q 2), the subject of believers praying is suspended in order to reassure the faithful that they need only do what they can and that God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear.

²⁸⁵ ... they say, “We hear and obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord. To You we all return!”— ²⁸⁶ **God does not burden any soul with more than it can bear: each gains whatever good it has done, and suffers its bad—**“Lord, do not take

⁴¹ Al-Bukhārī and Muslim, in Nawawī, al-Imam Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Din, *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn*, Albānī, Muḥammad Nāsir al-Dīn Ed, (Bayrūt: al-Maktab al-Islamī, 1979), Chapter 54, Hadith no. 446.

us to task if we forget or make mistakes. Lord, do not burden us as You burdened those before us.”

The description of the original prayer is then resumed. This particular reassurance is repeated elsewhere in the Qur’an, for instance in Q 7:42:

But those who believe and do good deeds—and **We do not burden any soul with more than it can bear**—are the people of the Garden and there they will remain.

Another example can be seen in Q 65:7.

Example C4. Q 48:22–25

The faithful are similarly provided with reassurance in v. 25 of Sūrat al-Faḥ.

²² If the disbelievers had fought against you, they would have taken flight and found no one to protect or support them: ²³ such was God’s practice in the past and you will find no change in God’s practices. ²⁴ In the valley of Mecca it was He who held their hands back from you and your hands back from them after He gave you the advantage over them —God sees all that you do. ²⁵ They were the ones who disbelieved, who barred you from the Sacred Mosque, and who prevented the offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. If there had not been among them, unknown to you, believing men and women whom you would have trampled underfoot, inadvertently incurring guilt on their account—**God brings whoever He will into His mercy** (*li-yudkhila llāhu fī raḥmatihī man yashāʾ*)—if the [believers] had been clearly separated, We would have inflicted a painful punishment on the disbelievers.

Nöldeke saw a lack of connection here and made a point of remarking upon this.⁴² Yet, as will be seen below, the short interpolation is connected, effective in its context, and intended

⁴² Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge*, 19: “At this negative hypothetical *law lā* the continuing clause is missing 24, 10 and 24, 20. Yet, the sentence is taken up again by ... v. 14 and here by the

to strengthen the hearts of the faithful by reinforcing the arguments made in the surrounding verses.

According to the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the believers had wanted to go into Mecca, to do umrah. The Meccans refused them entry and sent a delegation to Ḥudaybiyyah, where the Muslims were. The Prophet then accepted a truce which would allow the believers to enter Mecca the following year to perform umrah. The believers, however, were very unhappy about this agreement; more of an explanation was needed in order to reassure them. This reassurance was delivered in the form of this particular interpolation: “God brings whoever He will into His mercy.”⁴³ Moreover, as well as quietening the concerns of those who already believed, this interpolation can be read to emphasize the possibility that some of the disbelievers in Mecca might actually have become Muslims and received God’s mercy unknown to the would-be pilgrims. The Qur’an hastens to make this point before it gives the second part of the conditional sentence, “If the believers had been clearly separated”

The faithful were similarly reassured when the change of qiblah was made. The Qur’an specifies, “God would never let your faith go to waste [believers], for God is most compassionate and most merciful towards people” (Q 2:143). This statement was delivered in case someone said that the prayers of Muslims up to the point of change were wasted because they were directed to the wrong qiblah.

Type 2. A Change of Sentence Structure and Rhyme (3 examples) to make an urgent explanation

The examples discussed so far were of Type 1: “A Change of Topic.” Here we move on to Type 2, in which there is a suspension by change of sentence structure and rhyme. It will be shown that this occurs at junctures at which the Qur’an, within the context of the surrounding material, makes a very important point.

same words v. 21, but in between them there are all sorts of strange things. A true continuing clause is also missing in ... 48, 25. The final clause *li-yudkhila – yashā`u* can likewise be connected with the preceding; the following is a new conditional clause. The whole is a jumble, seemingly a product of Muḥammad’s confusion when the success he had hoped for, nay had been promised did not take place.”

⁴³ See Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 504.

Example 1. Q 4:155–60

Towards the end of Sūrat al-Nisā' (Q 4), the Qur'an provides a list of short reasons for forbidding the Jews "certain good things" that had been allowed for them (vv. 155–61). When it arrives at the Jews' claim that they killed Jesus (*wa-qawlihim innā qatalnā l-masīḥa ʿīsā bna maryama*), the pattern is suspended to produce an urgent and extended denial of this claim (vv. 157–59), this being an important matter of faith. It then resumes the original pattern of reasons for forbidding certain things to the Jews.

¹⁵⁵ And so for breaking their pledge (*fa-bi-mā naqḍihim mūthāqahum*), for rejecting God's revelations, for unjustly killing their prophets, for saying "Our minds are closed"—No! God has sealed them in disbelief, so they believe only a little—¹⁵⁶ and because they disbelieved (*wa-bi-kufrihim*) and uttered a terrible slander against Mary,¹⁵⁷ and said (*wa-qawlihim*), "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God." **(They did not kill him (*wa-mā qatalūhu*), nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him—¹⁵⁸ No! God raised him up to Himself. God has the power to decide. ¹⁵⁹ There is not one of the People of the Book who will not believe in [Jesus] before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them.)**¹⁶⁰ For the wrongdoings done by the Jews (*fa-bi-ẓulmin mina lladhīna ḥādū*), We forbade them certain good things that had been permitted to them before: for having frequently debarred others (*wa-bi-ṣaddihim*) from God's path ...

On this occasion, the urgency of explanation overrides the formal balancing of the list of reasons (introduced by *bi-* and a following series of nouns in the genitive case), and the pattern of composition of this passage is temporarily suspended.

Example 2. Q 19:30–41

Sūrat Maryam (Q 19) has a dominant rhyme pattern of - *yya*. The only exceptions to this pattern occur at vv. 34–35 with a new rhyme – *ūn*, followed in vv. 36–38 by – *īm*, and in vv. 39–40 by – *ūn*. Then from v. 41 it resumes the earlier pattern of -*yyā*. The relevant passage is provided in full below.

³⁰ [But] he said: “I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet (*nabiyyā*); ³¹ made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live (*hayyā*), ³² to cherish my mother. He did not make me graceless or domineering (*shaqiyyā*). ³³Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on me the day I die and the day I am raised to life again (*hayyā*).” ³⁴ **Such was Jesus, son of Mary. [This is] a statement of the Truth about which they are in doubt (*yamtarūn*): ³⁵ it would not befit God to have a child. He is far above that: when He decrees something, He says only, “Be,” and it is (*fa-yakūn*). ³⁶ God is my Lord and your Lord, so serve Him: that is a straight path (*mustaqīm*). ³⁷ But factions have differed among themselves. What suffering will come to those who obscure the truth when a dreadful Day arrives (*mashhadī yawmin ‘azīm*)! ³⁸ How sharp of hearing, how sharp of sight they will be when they come to Us, although now they are clearly off course (*lākini l-zālimūna l-yawma fī dalālin mubīn*)! ³⁹Warn them [Muḥammad] of the Day of Remorse, when the matter will be decided, for they are heedless and do not believe (*wa-hum lā yu‘minūn*). ⁴⁰ It is We who will inherit the earth and all who are on it: they will all be returned to Us (*wa-ilaynā yurja‘ūn*). ⁴¹ Mention too, in the Scripture, the story of Abraham. He was a man of truth, a prophet (*nabiyyā*) ...**

Here there is an interruption of the rhyme pattern after v. 33, as well as a change of speaker, from Jesus to God, as the discourse is interrupted by an urgent explanation denying that Jesus could be a son of God—an important theological issue that needed to be addressed. Having satisfied this requirement, the composition goes back to the original pattern of the surah, “Mention too, in the Scripture ...” (cf. v. 16, with reference to Mary, v. 51, with reference to Moses, v. 54, with reference to Ishmael, and v. 56, with reference to Idris).

Example 3. Q 74:26–37

Following a description of a bitter opponent of the Prophet and the Qur’an, God threatens:

²⁶ I will throw him into the scorching Fire. ²⁷ What will explain to you what the scorching Fire is? ²⁸ It spares nothing and leaves nothing; ²⁹ it scorches the skin; ³⁰ there are nineteen in charge of it. ³¹ **We have appointed only angels to guard Hellfire—and We have made their number a test for the disbelievers and so**

that those who have been given the Scripture will be certain and those who believe will have their faith increased and neither those who have been given the Scripture nor the believers will have any doubts, but the sick at heart and the disbelievers will say, ‘What could God mean by this description?’ In this way God leaves whoever He will to stray and guides whoever He will: no one knows your Lord’s forces except Him. It is only a reminder to mortals. ³² No! by the moon! ³³ By the departing night! ³⁴ By the shining dawn! ³⁵ It is one of the mightiest things, ³⁶ a warning to all mortals, ³⁷ to those of you who choose to go ahead and those who lag behind.

In v. 31 of Sūrat al-Muddaththir (Q 74), the Qur’an departs from the crisp, short verses before and after, to give a more discursive rebuttal in the form of one, much longer verse. The importance of this rebuttal overrides the stylistic requirements of the short successive verses in which it is embedded. Because of the demands of context (explained below): it was essential for this rebuttal to be given here, where it is required, rather than anywhere else in the Qur’an.

According to the *asbāb al-nuzūl*,⁴⁴ when the disbelievers of Mecca heard that there were only nineteen guards in charge of Hellfire, their response was to jeer. Abū Jahl was reported to have said to his companions, “Would ten of you be incapable of dealing with each of these nineteen ... ?” No further details are supplied in the *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature, but the Qur’an must have interrupted its flow to respond urgently, explaining that the “nineteen” referred to are angels, not normal people, and that their number was meant as a test for the disbelievers.

Whether the verse is wholly or partly Meccan or Medinan is not essential to the observation being made here, which is that the text of the Qur’an, as recited by the Prophet and read by Muslims ever since, presents an undeniable interruption of verse patterns precisely in order to make an important point.

⁴⁴ This particular version of events is supplied in ‘Abdullah Ibn ‘Umar al-Bayḍāwī, *Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988), vol. 2: 544. See also Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), part 30: 204; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr* (Baghdad: al-Muthanna, n.d.), vol. 2: 770. ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī did not deal with this verse in his *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Cairo: Hindiya Press, 1315 AH), 330.

Final Analysis

Looking at the list of 20 examples above in terms of the functions of such suspensions, we observe that securing obedience takes 8 of the examples, followed by highlighting an important point 5, reassuring 4 and making an urgent explanation 3. All of these are important functions of the text of the Qur'an, which clearly override expectations of form.

We have given examples of two types of suspension: Type 1, which involves a suspension of topic between adjacent verses, and Type 2, which involves a suspension of sentence structure. This last type is more of an aesthetic issue, in which the Qur'an overlooks consistency of sentence style for the sake of giving priority to making an important point. It is Type 1 that was obviously the more problematic for scholars like Bell, and clearly for some general readers, who saw no connection between the suspending topic and the surrounding material. In the analysis above we have endeavored to show that, on the contrary, there is a strong connection between the new topic and its surrounding context.

This moreover involves a rhetorical strategy we have termed *istikhdām*, where one topic is employed for the service of another, or where a situation is employed in order to make an important point. One obvious example of *istikhdām* is the use of stories of earlier prophets in various lengths and selections of material, to support the Prophet and the faithful and warn disbelievers in various contexts. A full study of the Qur'an should be undertaken to determine the full extent of this feature.

Alongside the main principle of *istikhdām* there is a second principle which I have termed *tajāwwur* ("adjacency"). This actually works as a cohesive device: the two subjects are placed together because of a deeper but unstated connection. Rather than inserting a clause of purpose such as, "to enable you to be generous in divorce, you should observe the prayer," the mere fact that verses dealing with divorce and prayer are adjacent to one another fulfils the same function. The connective function of *tajāwwur* is normally confirmed by what the Qur'an says in other places (see above Examples A1, A2, A6, among others).

A third principle of Qur'anic style demonstrated in the present essay is the self-contained nature (*istiqlāl*) of many Qur'anic statements.

This serves, in turn, the fourth principle of quotability (*tashīl al-iqtibās*), according to which readers can extrapolate the self-contained passage because it is not grammatically tied to the previous passage. For instance, the passage about observing the prayers comes independently after the passage on divorce. This quotability serves preachers and also calligraphic representation of quotable verses that stand by themselves and have an impact on

the reader outside their Qur'anic context. Q 2:238 can, accordingly, be seen in calligraphy on the top of the *miḥrab* in many mosques.

All of these features of Qur'anic style serve an important fifth principle: the teachings of the Qur'an are, at a deeper level, all interrelated and supportive of each other. I call this principle *taḍāfur al-ta'ālīm* ("the interweaving of teachings"). It exists so that the Qur'an's teachings can support each other, even when they come in different subjects placed next to each other without any formal linking device. The prayer supports the need for magnanimity in divorce; the cleansing for the five daily prayers supports the desire to be clean in food and sexual relations; fasting supports the prevention of people from consuming other people's wealth wrongfully and using it to bribe judges; the majesty of God in the Throne verse supports the impetus for charitable giving; verses dealing with lawful relationships that confer inheritance highlight the penalties of unlawful relationships and vice versa; being reminded of the balance God set in raising the heavens high and setting down the earth enables the observation of the right balance in human and environmental relations; shunning *laghw* of words and actions enables the faithful to perform the prayer; and praying together in the mosque enables them to discuss common matters by consultation.

Looking at the Qur'an from the perspective of these five principles allows one to capture the connectivity and interdependence of the teachings of the Qur'an at a deeper level even without the cohesive formal devices used in writing modern expository prose, the lack of which makes Bell and some others dismiss various Qur'anic verses as being unconnected. More studies of the Qur'an should be done according to its own stylistic features and ways of presenting its teachings.

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