

Book Reviews

A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an

Muhammad al-Ghazali

Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000. 804 pages.

There has been an increasing interest in the Qur'an's literary aspects within the field of Qur'anic studies over the last few years. In the past, western scholars have devoted a great deal of energy to tracing foreign influences in the Qur'an or reconstructing the chronology of its verses and *surahs*. However, the trend now is shifting toward textual studies, a development indicated by the proliferation of articles, anthologies, and books on the Qur'an as a composed literary ornament.

This shift is both refreshing and welcome, particularly for those who are more interested in understanding the Qur'an in its present form, rather than learning about its textual history or compilation. Classical Islamic scholarship developed a body of exegetical material on the Qur'an's miraculous nature (*i'jaz*) from a literary perspective. This approach has taken a primarily microscopic linguistic viewpoint (*balaghah* [eloquence]) of studying the choice of words and how the verses are constructed.

Although it has always been accepted that the Qur'an's *surahs* are distinct literary pieces with their own style and content, comprehensive attempts to present entire *surahs* as thematically independent entities have been rare. With increasing pressure from western scholars that the Qur'an is incoherent and haphazardly arranged, a new genre of exegetical material is developing, both in Muslim and western circles. This new genre focuses upon explaining why the *surah* should be considered as a distinctly composed piece with its own dynamic of sound and meaning. Muhammad al-Ghazali's work falls within this emerging category of Qur'anic exegesis.

A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an is a translation from al-Ghazali's *Al-Tafsir al-Mawdu'i*. The print is well typeset and easily legible, not cramped together, with a glossy green cover commanding an elegance

worthy of the title. The work is arranged in 114 chapters, one for each *surah*. Each *surah* is discussed within the context of life in the Arabian peninsula as well as the particular circumstances confronting the Prophet. The subject matter is expertly woven together, thereby highlighting a central theme in relation to which the *surah* should be read and interpreted.

The author is careful to contextualize those verses related to war and women, exemplifying his moderate and mature stance on critical and sensitive issues. At times he supports his ideas from Prophetic traditions and stories from the Companions' lives, and often relates the Qur'anic verses to contemporary situations to guide the troubled Muslim Ummah. His treatment of subjects is often by cross-referencing other parts of the Qur'an in order to reach a holistic understanding. A valuable index at the end contains a list of all cross-referenced verses. Another index with a list of important words and phrases adds to the value of the book as a reference work.

A number of things need to be considered while treating the *surah* as a unity, such as rhythm and rhyme, structure, and meaning. Although al-Ghazali makes rare reference to style (e.g., *Surah Maryam*, which has "a unique and distinctive rhythm" or *Surat al-Tur*, which has "a gentle and soothing effect on the human spirit"), he devotes almost exclusive attention to meaning. This approach leaves someone who is already familiar with the Qur'an wanting more.

Attempts to show coherence also have kept in mind the *surahs'* arrangement by placing them in thematic clusters or showing links between *surahs* that proximate each other. Shaykh al-Ghazali makes a stray reference to these groupings at times (e.g., *Surat al-An'am*, which he identifies as the first Makkan *surah* of the "initial seven long *surahs*," or *Surah Ghafir*, which is "the first of a group of seven *surahs* opening with the two Arabic letters *ha'* and *mim'*"), but does not elaborate much upon the relationships between them.

Historical contextualization, which plays a major role in the book, is done within the generalized grand narrative provided by Muslim historians, often without reference to specific events, and almost never citing source material. Such a style demands that the work be categorized as "polemical" rather than "academic." It is a work by a devout Muslim from within the classical tradition seeking to make it relevant to life in the modern world.

Overall, the book is excellent reading for a wide-ranging audience interested in the Qur'an, but also Islam in general. It is a good companion for Muslims looking to make sense of the Qur'an through moderate and mature streams of Qur'anic interpretation within their tradition. It is also a

fine means for the general public that has little or no knowledge of Islam to approach the Qur'an.

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