

A THEMATIC
COMMENTARY
ON THE
QUR'AN

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazālī

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Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazālī

Translated from the Arabic by
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FOREWORD

MUSLIMS ARE ENJOINED, along with the rest of humanity, to “read” the two great books of Revelation and Creation, i.e. the Qur’an and the natural world. Reading one without the other will result in an imbalance detrimental to the existence (and prosperity) of humankind on earth, indeed to the divine purpose in the cosmos. Fatalism, world-rejection and stultification of the intellect and the imagination are some of the results of a “reading” that excludes the real-existential. Arrogance and a rampant lust for power at whatever cost are among the by-products of an absorption with the material world at the expense of the spiritual and moral. In both cases, people walk away from their role as *khulafā’* (stewards) on earth and from all the responsibilities of compassion, mercy, fraternity, moderation, and other duties which that role implies in relation to God, fellow human beings, and the environment.

A Thematic Commentary by the late Shaykh al-Ghazālī is a significant contribution to the first reading, i.e., that of the Qur’an—the repository of divine truth and enlightenment. Already of course there is a wealth, indeed an abundance, of exegetical work on the Qur’an. But while the ancient scholars have endeavored to elucidate many linguistic, historical, and miraculous aspects of the sacred, ever-wondrous and challenging text, al-Ghazālī’s contribution is somewhat unique (and contemporary) in the sense that it focuses on the organic unity of each surah (chapter) highlighting the logic or inherent reasoning that courses through the surah and unifies its various components and images.

Indeed, to the uninitiated, the Qur’an can seem quite daunting, even bewildering. The titles of the surahs do not appear to reflect their subject matter; the ordering of the verses and the surahs does

Foreword

not seem to fall into a set pattern; the structuring of the topics within the individual surahs, especially the longer ones, does not appear systematic; there is often a blend of narrative, polemics, anecdotes, and straightforward instruction. The diction resorts to a variety of linguistic and stylistic devices.

There is no dispute among Muslims over the authenticity or integrity of the Qur'anic text; even secular students of Islam no longer seem to argue very much over this issue. Differences have always existed, though, over the precise interpretation and application of Qur'anic statements and injunctions. As issues proliferate and life becomes more complex, the need to throw a new light on the meaning of the Qur'anic text grows.

Shaykh al-Ghazālī's cogent method of interpretation takes account of the fact (or premise) that each surah has its unique coherent and integral character. This character is defined by a main subject, or a theme of interrelated topics which together form the body of the surah's subject matter. Once the central subject or theme is identified, the jigsaw pieces come together, enunciating how the rest of the surah falls into line with, or can be related to, that theme.

This is where Shaykh al-Ghazālī's greatest contribution lies. By adopting this method, he is able to make the Qur'an more easily accessible, and the task of unlocking its secrets less daunting, more rewarding. In addition to appreciating the beauty of the Qur'an, the reader is now able to have a clearer understanding of its meaning and flow. The surahs come alive, each one assuming distinct features and characteristics that make it stand out and claim its unique position within the whole design and sweep.

Another feature of Shaykh al-Ghazālī's work is that he places the Qur'anic subjects within their proper historic and cultural context. This has the effect of relating the Qur'anic subject matter not only to the life and career of Prophet Muhammad, but also to today's world, thereby transforming it into a source of practical guidance and a ready reference for dealing with contemporary issues.

Foreword

No exegesis is by itself sufficient for a full understanding of the Qur'an. But this work is an indispensable companion in the quest for a better comprehension of, and a closer affinity with, the sacred text.

Al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍūʿī was originally published in Arabic in three volumes. The IIIT translated and published the first two volumes separately in 1997 and 1999. The current volume incorporates all three volumes into one edition.

The translation of the meaning of the Qur'an used in this book is mainly ʿAbdullah Yūsuf ʿAlī's *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Amana Publications, 1996) and *The Message of the Qur'an* by Muhammad Asad (Dar al-Andalus Limited, 1980). However, we used several other translations and made changes whenever we deemed it necessary for the sake of elucidation and precision of meaning. Footnotes have been added by the editorial team for further clarification or explanation of terms. Following the IIIT house style, Arabic words appearing in English dictionaries have not been italicized.

We would like to express our thanks and gratitude to the translator, Ashur Shamis; the editorial and production team at the London Office and those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book: Zaynab Alawiye, Sohail Nakhoda, Shiraz Khan, Ataiya Pathan, Amanda Adams and Alexandra Grayson.

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

THIS WORK PRESENTS a new approach to the study of the Qur'an which I had adopted in some of my earlier writings. Ever since I embarked on the task of producing this work, I have been daunted by a feeling of inadequacy, a fear of being unable to do the Qur'an the justice it deserves. My decision to go ahead with it nevertheless has been as much for my own sake as for that of the readers.

The Qur'an is a vast and rich world, with widely varying themes and subjects and endless possibilities for interpretation and analysis. This work is but a small contribution to the noble objective of understanding the Qur'an, and it is being undertaken in the hope that I might tap certain areas or open certain doors not tapped nor opened before. According to this approach, each surah of the Qur'an is treated as one whole unit. A thematic explanation, or overview, of each surah is then presented, identifying its main theme, or themes, and the subtle threads of meaning and ideas that link its subject matter. I have taken meticulous care in dealing with the main theme of each surah, regardless of the number of different issues it raises or addresses. In this, I have emulated the excellent pioneering work of the late Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd Allah Darrāz in his study of *al-Baqarah*, the longest chapter in the Qur'an.

I began learning the Qur'an during my early childhood, and committed it all to memory by the age of ten. Ever since I started to study it seriously, I have been convinced that there is a need for this type of commentary. But, as I read the Qur'an today, going through my eighties, I still find that I have grasped only a fraction of its meaning. I feel a pressing need to go deeper into it and to try and link the themes, passages, and sections found in each surah, in order to identify its character and its overall purpose.

Author's Introduction

The method I have adopted consists of highlighting only those verses and passages that represent or enhance the features and the character of the main theme of the surah. This implicitly assumes that readers have to fill in the gaps and fit the rest of the surah into the overall picture themselves. Needless to say, this method of studying the Qur'an in no way undervalues or replaces the traditional methods and approaches adopted by other students and scholars of the Qur'an. It merely complements their great works and facilitates an easier and more accessible way of understanding the text.

Another aspect of thematic commentary on the Qur'an which I have not attempted to adopt here, is to identify the major themes of the Qur'an as a whole and discuss the issues and subjects it covers in the light of those themes. I had made use of this feature in other writings of mine, published in Arabic, such as: *Al-Maḥāwir al-Khamsah li al-Qur'an al-Karīm* (Five Central Themes of the Qur'an) and *Nazarāt fī al-Qur'an* (Glimpses into the Qur'an). Surely, the study and understanding of the Qur'an can benefit from both approaches and from all efforts that will make its meaning, wisdom, and beauty easier to grasp and appreciate. The Qur'an shall remain an eternal fountain of knowledge, a guidance for all humanity, and a living proof of the Power and Glory of God Almighty.

Ṣafar 1413
August 1992

MUHAMMAD AL-GHAZĀLĪ

Muslims are enjoined, along with the rest of humanity, to ‘read’ the two great Books of Revelation and Creation, i.e. the Qur’an and the natural world. Reading one without the other will result in an imbalance detrimental to the existence (and prosperity) of humankind on earth, indeed to the divine purpose in the cosmos.

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No exegesis is by itself sufficient for a full understanding of the Qur’an. But this work is an indispensable companion in the quest for a better comprehension of, and a closer affinity with, the sacred text.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazālī was born on 5 Dhū’l Hijjah 1335/22 September 1917 in al-Buḥayrah, Egypt, and died on 19 Shawwāl 1416/9 March 1996. During his lifetime he taught at the University of Umm al-Qura in Makkah, the University of Qatar, and at al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir University for Islamic Sciences in Algeria. Before his death, he held the post of Chairman of the Academic Council of the International Institute of Islamic Thought in Cairo. Shaykh al-Ghazālī authored more than sixty books, many of which have been translated into various languages, and was also the recipient of many awards, including the First Order of the Republic of Egypt (1988), the King Faisal Award (1989) and the Excellence Award from Pakistan

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