

## **The Qur'an as a Non-Linear Text: Rethinking Coherence**

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### **Abstract**

The non-linear order of revelations is often considered by many scholars to signify lack of coherence, disunity, and fragmentariness. It seems that 'coherence' and the related terms have veiled a significant linguistic feature of the Qur'an, namely, the non-linear nature of revelations, which might be used to make a distinction between ordinary and Quranic discourse. We will argue that to unveil the non-linearity, we should consider revelations in relation to God who reveals Himself in language not as an ordinary speaker whose speech is limited to a certain context, with a beginning and an end. We should not expect God to speak like a man. The Qur'an, thus, is seen here as a non-temporal, non-linear text that reflects its divine origin, by systematically destructing the spacio-temporal context and the linear order of language.

**Keywords:** Quran, Linearity, Text, Structuralism, Coherence.

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## Introduction

For a long time since the revelations came first, the Qur'an has had an unrivaled effect upon almost all scholarly works in Arabic language. In fact, Arabic linguistics as an outstanding tradition in its time with all its syntactic, morphological, phonological, and semantic studies has served the prime goal of clarifying the linguistic features of the Qur'an and making the text more accessible to Arab as well as non-Arab readers. Though, the motivation for doing linguistic work has been a religious one in the Islamic tradition, Arabic linguistics has largely been a scientific and descriptive one in its method<sup>1</sup>. Yet, it is unfortunate that the tradition does not come down to us as a continuous trend. There is little mention made of Arabic linguistics today. However, in its absence, the original cause that had given rise to it, invites more and more linguistic work. The extent to which modern scholarly works on language with its non-metaphysical orientation can do any good to bring into light the textual features of the Qur'an, remains an open question.

What can make modern studies of the Quran even more necessary, is the demand of modern readers from different parts of the world, who can now access the printed Quran with great ease. Given the facts of globalization and the

ever-increasing contact of people from different cultures and religions, the Quran may also be read by curious non-Muslim readers who approach the Quran from outside the context or the belief system with a critical eye. The problem of readership with regard to the Quran, is a serious one, which cannot be ignored. One of the serious questions in the way of reading the Quran is its unusual language and style which Richard Bell describes:

... a real characteristic of Quranic style, namely that it is disjointed. Only seldom do we find in it evidence of sustained unified composition at any great length... some of the narratives, too, in the Qur'an, especially accounts of Moses and of Abraham, run to considerable length; but they tend to fall into separate incidents instead of being recounted straightforwardly... The distinctness of the separate pieces, however, is more obvious than their unity... (Watt: 73-74)

The above extracts describe an old concern with the Qur'an, which has been introduced by Muslim exegetes and scholars like Zarkashi (1977) and Seyouti (1975) as a major part of the Quranic sciences dealing with the relation of every verse and Sura to the preceding and following ones. The main question here arises as "why the Qur'an appears so fragmentary failing to meet the expectation of readers who wish to read each subject with no interruption to the end?" In the modern times, however, the

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1. Versteegh (1997: 42) describes the syntactic studies carried by the great Muslim linguists like Sibawayhi as largely descriptive since to them the judgment of the native speakers of Arabic was an important factor in deciding on the grammaticality of a given structure.

question continues to be asked leading to a variety of explanations. As one example, to Richard Bell, the reason why revelations looked fragmentary was attributed to 'the fact that parts of the Suras were originally written down, more or less at random, on the backs of other parts, and then tacked on to follow them by the later editors'(Arberry: 11).

Though Bell's hypothesis seems to be negative on the possibility of conceiving any textual unity for the Qur'an, we can consider his explanation as implying a tendency to look for an original order and coherence, which has been lost while compiling and recording the Qur'an. This way of probing historical evidence to deal with the problem has apparently no linguistic significance and, as I will argue, it is quite inconsistent with the structure of the Qur'an. Appealing to historical evidence has also been common among Muslims who, while believing in no alternative order, which might have been lost, warn us against imposing any relation or link between neighboring verses. Thus, Ezz-e-ddin Abdd-o-ssalam notes:

If revelations were revealed under different circumstances, they should not be necessarily related to one another. The person who seeks to impose any links on such revelations, doesn't know that good speech is devoid of such loose ties, let alone by the Qur'an, which is the most eloquent speech (quoted in Abu-Zayd: 275).

The above quotation as typical of explanations, which depend on extra-linguistic evidence seem to achieve nothing but confirming that the problem (the so-called fragmentariness) really exists. The main claim in explanations of this sort is that the revelations came to the prophet in a period of twenty three years on quite different contexts and in response to different demands of the existing community. Such explanations tell us nothing about the textual property we know as fragmentariness. In addition, while it is possible referring to historical events as the original contexts for some of the verses, for the majority of them, no original context is known. There is simply no sense trying to associate historical circumstances in the early Islamic period with, for example, the revelations reporting Moses' or Abraham's life and prophethood.

A great number of Muslim scholars, however, focus on the text in the hope to find some formal or semantic link between neighboring verses and Suras. From the most recent work we may cite Bazargan (1993) who has done his best to find some link between the end of every Sura and the beginning of the other. One can hardly ignore the significance of the links, which Bazagan and many others have tried to locate within the text, yet the main question "why the text appears so?" remains to account for. Some Muslim scholars such as Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd have described these

explanations as largely subjective, "this is not to say that these relations are concrete and objective and exist independently of the interpreter's thinking; it is to be noted that these are produced in the process of reading and the interaction of the text and reader" (2001:285).

There are other works like Mir (1986) carried out more recently which, while critical of the dominant atomist approaches to the Qur'an, argue for a certain unity and harmony dominating the text. We can also mention Smith (2001) who, by focusing on the structure of the second Sura tries to maintain certain thematic consistency for the Qur'an, which is based on a thematic repetition dominating the Sura, specifically with regard to the revelatory authority of the Qur'an vis-à-vis the previous scriptures.

### **Aims and Method**

The above controversy seems to be in itself good clue to the lack of a theoretical basis to serve as a point of departure for studies of this sort--studies which, more than anything, would deal with the linguistic structure of the text. There is yet no theory of the text to make a major distinction between ordinary speech and the Quranic discourse. It is also unfortunate that, although readers, in particular believers, are well aware that revelations, as an integral part of a belief system, are understood only in relation to God who is not imprisoned in time

and space and who is not caught in human language, they often approach them with anthropomorphism, expecting God to speak like a man. The same expectation might account for our question 'why the text does not appear in a linear order?' Making a distinction between ordinary discourse and the Qur'an could teach us what to expect and what not to expect of revelations.

The incentive to deal with the above question was not at the beginning so much coherence, rather a sort of repetition that I came across throughout the Qur'an. The question was why the account of Moses and his people is so frequently repeated, occupying a considerable space in great Suras like 2, 5, 20, 26, 28, 40? However, the more I asked, the more I was convinced that no such an answer exists--an answer that could explain repetition with reference to the linguistic structure of the text. Great chapters of books in Quranic sciences were instead devoted to the question 'why revelations appeared so fragmentary? I soon found that what came to me as repetition was described in the literature as incoherence.

As a student of linguistics, I looked for a different explanation, believing that a linguistic issue such as repetition or coherence should be accounted from within, through the analysis of the structural relations in the text. The adoption of a linguistic approach to deal with the issue was not easy as there were many schools

focusing on the concept *text* as their primary concern, of which we can mention the functional school that is often associated with the name of the British linguist M. Halliday and his colleague R. Hasan. In one of their famous works (1976), they analyze the linguistic devices that constitute the textual ties in a text. Their concept of *cohesion* can be an appropriate tool to explain the formal and semantic relations in a text. In addition, Halliday's functional-systemic approach is well incorporated into the study of literary works. This appears brilliantly in Hasan (1985), who in the beginning chapters of her book discusses parallelism, contrast and repetition of structure as textual elements responsible for the construction of poetry. These two works can be appropriate analytic too, to deal with cohesive ties in the text but they offer little on coherence in the sense we need to study the Qur'an.

What I found most interesting was the concept linearity in Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics. He presents *linearity* as a fundamental property of speech upon which the whole mechanism of linguistic structure depends. As he puts it,

Unlike visual signals (e.g. ships' flags) which can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously, auditory signals have available to them only the linearity of time. The elements of such signals are presented one after another: they form a chain. This

feature appears immediately when they are represented in writing, and a spatial line of graphic signs is substituted for a succession of sounds in time (Saussure, 1988: 14 ).

Although Saussure defines the term in a narrow sense as the sequence of the speech sounds that appear one after the other in the linearity of time, we can easily speak of a linear ordering of words and sentences, or more generally any linguistic unit. The same can be said of a narrative whose parts are structured in a linear fashion mirroring the respective time sequence each event has taken place.

In the present study, which focuses primarily on Ayahs, we are not so much concerned with solving the problem of "coherence". We aim more at re-examining our very understanding of what we call *coherence* or *fragmentariness*, by demonstrating that coherence is much more complicated than it is often shown to be. Meanwhile, I will argue that the permanent change of subject within a passage or the repetition of a certain topic throughout the Qur'an is not enough reason to consider it fragmentary. I will refer to non-linearity as a linguistic feature of the Quranic discourse which has not so far been acknowledged as an independent subject in the literature. What is taken as fragmentariness and lack of coherence, I will identify as a non-linear order brought about by the repetition of a subject in different parts of the Qur'an. The aim of this article is to

bring into light non-linearity as a concept, which can play a crucial part in distinguishing revelations from ordinary speech. The possibility of such a distinction will likely lead us to the Quranic idea that God does not speak like a man. 'It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or that He should send a messenger ...', (42: 51).

I will also argue that going beyond linear order is closely linked to destructing the temporal order and context, and putting the Qur'an out of any specific context. However, going beyond linearity and temporality as two basic attributes of ordinary language does not entail lack of order; the linear order is not the only type of order. The Qur'an possesses the special order of its own, which makes the text look like an interwoven web of relations in which, non-linearity may even play a positive role to bring about further coherence. It should also be noted that in my analysis of revelations, I have merely cited English translations, for the main focus of this study is not the formal and lexical properties of the original Arabic version but the sequence of themes or subjects that appear one after the other. The adoption of this approach to discussing the Quranic revelations would probably make the discussion more accessible to English readers.

### **Coherence or Linearity?**

Despite the great number of works carried out to deal with coherence by both Muslim and

western scholars, in the course of the study, however, I came across little or no critical work to question our very understanding of what we term *fragmentariness* or *the permanent change of subjects* in the Qur'an. The problem with the existing literature is that the question of coherence is asked, but non-linearity is often left to the background. It has never been formulated as a question, which would probably send coherence to the background, or at least postpone it to when the non-linear property has been investigated.

To better realize the nature of the question asked, we may begin with the following verses extracted from Sura 17 often cited as a fragmentary text. I could have cited all that Sura below, were space not significant. To be even briefer, I have omitted parts in which, no change of subject is felt. Instead, the words containing the explicit statement of the subject are written in bold. In addition, every verse bears its original number in the Sura.

(23) Thy Lord has decreed you shall **not serve any but Him**<sup>1</sup>,

and to **be good to parents**, whether one or both of them attains old age with thee; say not to them 'Fie' neither chide them, but speak unto them words respectful,

(24) and lower to them the wing of humbleness out of mercy and say, 'My Lord,

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1. The translations of all Quranic passages cited in this paper are quoted from Arberry ( 1955 ).

have mercy upon them, as they raised me up when I was little.'

(25) **Your Lord knows very well what is in your hearts** if you are righteous, for He is All-forgiving to those who are penitent.

(26) **And give the kinsman his right**, and the needy, and the traveler;

And never squander;

(27) **the squanderers are brothers of Satan**, and Satan is unthankful to his Lord.

(28) But if thou turnest from them, seeking mercy from thy Lord that thou hopest for, then **speak unto them gentle words**.

(29) And **keep not thy hand chained to thy neck** nor outspread it widespread altogether... Surely he is aware of and sees his servants.

(31) And **slay not your children** for fear of poverty...

(32) And **approach not fornication**; surely it is an indecency, and evil as a way.

(33) And **slay not the soul God has forbidden**, except by right...

(34) And do not approach the authority of **the orphan** save in the fairest manner...

And fulfill the covenant; surely the covenant shall be questioned of.

(35) And **fill up the measure when you measure**, and weigh with straight balance;

(36) And **pursue not that thou hast no knowledge of**;

As we notice, in the small passage above, thirteen different subjects are mentioned. The

verse (23) warns believers not to serve any one but Allah. It continues with recommending believers to be good and humble to their parents. At the end of the second verse, the subject changes and three other topics are raised but immediately after, the same subject, that is, "being humble to parents" reappears in (28). One can hardly deny the permanent change of subject in these verses. This is, as we saw earlier, interpreted as incoherence and disunity. But if this passage counts as an example of incoherence and disunity, we can ask 'under what condition the above extract and the whole Book would seem coherent?' The possible answer is that the Book would look coherent if all verses dealing with a certain subject, say the story of Moses, appear continuously in one part or chapter. For example, to be regarded coherent, the two disjointed verses above recommending believers *to be humble toward parents* should join --were it possible at all-- each other and other verses dealing with the same subject in 31: 14-15. If we consider merely the textual aspect, *coherence* could be defined as the unity of a piece of discourse in a way that, all utterances are directed toward the same topic. Accordingly, the above extract taken together is incoherent for it is about various subjects.

We can continue with another question: what would happen if there were no other mentions for the subjects above? Could we talk

of incoherence any longer? Could we then say that the verse "and pursue not that thou hast no knowledge of" (17:36) is complete or coherent by itself? This can be conceived only if the readers are also taken into account, assuming them to be listening to a set of advices made by their Lord. If, according to the Quranic belief 'God is with you wherever you are (57: 4),' so, reading it puts readers before their Lord. They listen from their Lord. However, this is not merely a matter of belief or a matter of how to read as all sentences are in the present tense and directed toward the reader who is also the addressed. This is a general fact we witness everywhere in the Qur'an, even when, the story of a prophet is told. So, there is one sense in which the, above utterances can make a unified text: all of them are addressed to the reader.

The reason why the passage above is described as fragmentary is more related to its other occurrences elsewhere than to the preceding or following verses. For example, the verse mentioning Moses at the beginning of Sura 17 "And We gave Moses the Book, and made it a guidance to the Children of Israel" is a kin to a great number of verses in Suras 1, 7, 20, 26, 28, and 40. What makes the text look fragmentary is not only the relation of its parts to the immediate linguistic context but equally and more significantly the relation of each part to other verses absent from that context. A point we shall be gradually developing is that what

makes the text look discontinuous is more dependent on these repetitions than on any other factor. So, if there were no other related verses in other Suras, each verse above could be complete and coherent by itself.

The point will be clear if we consider the question in a larger scale where a relatively long story is retold several times throughout the text. As a good example, we may consider the story of Moses in Sura 20 which runs to seven pages giving a detailed account of Moses' birth, of how he was saved from the sea, his being addressed by the Lord, his mission to Pharaoh and inviting him to believe in God. This is a continuous uninterrupted narrative which we can justifiably claim to be complete by itself provided that there weren't any other occurrences of the same story elsewhere. However, the story repeats itself in 26, 28, and 40 in detail with parts omitted from and added to the main story. For example, in 40, a believer who has converted to Moses speaks to people in Pharaoh's court comes in but a major part dealing with Moses birth and life is omitted. Moses' account in 20 or in any of these Suras is in no way incoherent *by itself*, but only by reference to other mentions of the story in other Suras. The reason why the chapter on Joseph looks so coherent and unified is a similar one: it is coherent because there is no absent detail for the story mentioned elsewhere.

Another important point with regard to the above example is that the different versions of



the story are not like the dispersed parts of a puzzle to join them together in one part as in each version a major part is repeated with similar, if not identical, wording. It is predictable therefore that these passages dealing with Moses resist any linear order, for there is no sense trying to join repeated parts in the hope of making a text continuous or coherent. So, contrary to Bell's hypothesis concerning the present arrangement of Ayahs and the implied original order which have been lost, there is no original linear order to look for. There are other instances, like the following, which can be more readily termed "repetition",

And We adorned the lower heaven with lamps, and to preserve, (41: 12).

And We adorned the lower heaven with the adornment of the stars and to preserve against every rebel Satan; (37: 6-7).

The almost identical English wordings, which echo the original Arabic, is a clear example of repetition, where a major part is repeated exactly but another part ("against every rebel Satan") missing from the first example is added in the second. Instances of exact repetition where no additional information is supplied are also found everywhere in the text. The phrases "surely thy Lord, He is the All-mighty, the All-compassionate" in Sura 26 and "O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?" in 55 are repeated exactly several times in their

respective Suras. All the examples cited so far suggest repetition as a major factor responsible for the revelations to look discontinuous and non-linear. From here, I use the term "non-linear" instead of "fragmentary" or "incoherent" as I do not consider repetition and non-linearity as concepts leading to lack of unity. Examples discussed so far which are found throughout the text present non-linearity as a major linguistic feature of the Qur'an. It becomes an integral part of the Quranic style which, above any other fact, is in line with the idea that 'It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him,...' (42: 51). God is not a speaker in the ordinary sense of the word to speak in a linear manner from a beginning to an end. For the Qur'an, there is no preface, no introduction, no beginning, and no end. A reader can start reading from anywhere in the text.

### The Question of "Who speaks?"

An interesting linguistic feature closely tied to non-linearity is that there is no single speaker for the verses. In the majority of cases, after the phrase *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* (بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ) and at the beginning of a Sura, a first person plural who is the Sender of scriptures and prophets appears as speaker,

*We have sent it down as an Arabic Koran; haply you will understand. (12:2)*

The same speaker appears in first person singular as well,

*So remember Me, and I will remember you; and be thankful to Me; and be you not ungrateful towards Me. (2:152)*

*Say: "O My servants who have been prodigal against yourselves, do not despair of God's mercy; Surely God forgives sins altogether; surely, He is the all-forgiving, the all-compassionate. (39:53)*

*How then were My chastisement and My warnings. (54:16)*

Yet in other verses, the angels are speaking,  
*None of us is there, but has a known station; we are the rangers, we are they that give glory. (37:164-6)*

*We come not down, save at the commandment of thy Lord. To Him belongs all that is before us, and all that is behind us and all between that. (19:64)*

It is noted that in the above verses whose linguistic speaker is not the Sender of the revelation, God appears in the third person singular. But last of all comes the most interesting instance in which the prophet or any reader addresses God,

*Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour, Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray. (1:5-7)*

The above discussion demonstrates the fact that revelations have no constant ordinary speaker to have uttered them in a linear way to

the end. As far as facts of ordinary speech are concerned, this is not in accord with the logical structure of linear speech. Speech is necessarily linear, limited to context and to a certain speaker. But Allah is the Lord of all and his Book aims to be read by all. It should now be clear why a text as such does not appear in a linear order.

### **Repetition and Going Beyond Context**

Non-linearity together with other textual features such as repetition and plurality of the speaking subject are not the possibilities taking place in the ordinary speech, which is necessarily context-bound and linear. Linearity is also a feature closely woven to temporality. In fact, non-linearity is thinkable where we pass from speech to a writing which, represents possibilities for trespassing temporality, by virtue of its durable non-temporal nature. The Qur'an seems to be making full use of the capabilities of writing in going beyond speech attributes particularly time. On a closer look at the Qur'an, we can see repetition and destruction of the linear order as part of a general linguistic strategy the text uses to go beyond context. To gradually conceiving this, let us consider the story of Moses once again, in Suras 20 and 28, where the dialogue between God and Moses on the Mount is reported with similar but at the same time different wordings. Here a single event is reported in two linguistic

forms. Of those long narratives, I mention just one short example from the two Suras:

When he came to it, a voice cried, 'Moses, I am thy Lord; put off thy shoes; thou art in the holy valley, Towa (20: 11-12).

When he came to it, a voice cried from the right bank of the watercourse, in the sacred hollow coming from the tree: Moses, I am God, the Lord of all being (28: 30).

The story of Moses in the two Suras has a major repeated part which, begins from where he was addressed by God with the above words. The part dealing with the period before the above address is reported in Sura 28 but is absent from 20. However, as for the repeated parts, were these parts exactly identical, one could describe them as pure repetitions. Almost all verses describing Moses' account are dialogues reported directly through a phrase like 'said he/she' ('qaala' or 'qaalat'). When reading each one with no reference to the other, we may tend to consider the reported dialogues as actual linguistic events taken place in a certain context. But reporting the same dialogue with different wordings could imply that the reported verses are not linguistic events in the ordinary sense of the word. There is simply no context to confine the revelations, because each wording negates the occurrence of the other and vice versa.

In fact, arguments to support the fact that the Qur'an is not confined to any context can find

evidence in almost all parts of the Book and the verses that I will analyze in the following represent merely a very small portion of the abundant examples. To better grasp the part repetitions play in destructing context, let us consider another example.

'Thy sign,' God said, 'is that thou shalt not speak, save by tokens, to men for three days...' [3: 41].

He said, 'Lord appoint to me some sign.' 'Said He, 'Thy sign is that thou shalt not speak to men, though being without fault, three nights' [19: 10].

As we notice above, in both cases part of the dialogue between God and Zakariya--when Zakariya asked Lord to grant him a son--is reported. What is significant here is that the same linguistic event with its specific context is reported again, with two different wordings. The main import of these verses is that the revelations report not a linguistic event, as every linguistic event is unique with respect to a certain context. Moreover, the event cannot realize in two different wordings simultaneously. In other words, every utterance is unique for it is uttered just once. Hence, we may justifiably claim that as far as linguistic form is concerned, each verse negates the occurrence of the other as a linguistic unit with a certain context. Examples as such are found every where in the Book and, upon our reading, they serve well to put revelations beyond

context. So the repetitions perform two different functions simultaneously: they make the text a non-linear one and at the same time contribute a great deal to destructing any fixed context.

Repetition in the sense described earlier is only one of the many factors in putting the Qur'an beyond context. In fact, escaping context is a general feature occurring throughout the text even when coherence is not at stake. This is more clearly evident where two speakers report the same story in two different tenses. Of the great number of examples, I have chosen a relatively simple one. This is where messengers of God come to Abraham and tell him of their mission to demolish the people of Loot:

Said he [Abraham], and what is your business, envoys?' they said, 'we have been sent to a people of sinners, to loose upon them stones of clay marked with thy Lord for the prodigal.' So, We brought forth such believers as were in it, but We found not therein except one house of those that have surrendered themselves. And therein, We left a sign to those who fear the painful chastisement [51: 31-37].

The above story reports a dialogue between the angels and Abraham where the angels inform him of their mission. The report of their mission begins with 'we have been sent...' but it is interesting that the same report is continued

by God who intervenes with the pronoun 'WE'. In fact two linguistic events share the narration of one and the same story; the first takes place between Abraham and angels and the second has God and the prophet Mohammad (or the reader) as the two sides of the dialogue. In other words, a single story is narrated by two speakers belonging to two different times: by angels who are present for Abraham, but past for the reader, and by a Speaker Who is present to both Abraham and the reader.

Our purpose in citing most of the passages above is to stress on the crucial link between repetition and the destruction of context. Repetition is an important linguistic strategy in the overall structure of the Qur'an affecting context and in turn affected by it. These repetitions as a major cause of the discontinuity are understood better when put in the more significant and general context of the monotheism the Qur'an represents. What appears to be a recurrent theme of the revelation is that it is a sign from Lord to all people not just those who lived when revelations were sent down. This being the case, we should not expect revelations to be linguistically confined to a fixed time, place, speaker and addressee. We can hypothesize that a destruction of context should consistently displace the Qur'an from its original historical context just to make it an eternal address from God to readers of every time.

At this point, we have an explanation of why the Qur'an is not in linear order. We can ask what will happen if the revelation were an uninterrupted report of this and other event? To put it more plainly, what would the Qur'an look like were all stories reported like that of Joseph? It was then possible to say that these 150 pages are devoted to Moses and his people and those thirty pages to Abraham and so on to the end. That would make the Qur'an a story of the prophets and peoples. In that case, it was only part of the history--a thesis, which negates the Quranic theme that it is sign for all people. Obviously, telling a story is not in line with a monotheism that is not limited by any context. To expect the text to proceed in a linear order is the outcome of an anthropomorphism with which we wrongly approach the Book of God. The same anthropomorphism may account for our misunderstanding of the decisive role these discontinuities serve in freeing the revelations from context and any temporal ordering. Here, I wish to say in voice with Arberry that

an eternal composition such as the Qur'an is, cannot be understood if it is submitted to the test of only temporal criticism. It is simply irrelevant to expect that the themes treated in the individual Sura will be marshalled after some mathematical precision to form a rationally ordered pattern; the logic of revelation is not the logic of schoolmen...there is no 'before' or 'after' in the prophetic

message, when that message is true; everlasting truth is not held within the confines of time and space, but every moment reveals itself wholly and completely (1955).

### Non-linearity and Coherence

So far, I discussed three related issues: Firstly, what has been presented as fragmentariness and lack of coherence has veiled the non-linear nature of revelations ; secondly, non-linearity along with other textual properties, some of which were mentioned above, is a key factor contributing to the theme that God is not a speaker in the ordinary sense of the word and 'It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, (42: 51); and thirdly, non-linearity is one of the key factors for the revelations to escape temporality. To escape linearity and temporality is in fact distancing revelations from two key features of speech. Thus the Qur'an can be conceived as a non-linear and timeless text which mirrors a God who is limited to no context.

From the beginning, the aim has been to deal with coherence only indirectly, trying to argue instead that non-linearity can by itself be the subject of an independent study. For the believer who has followed the argument to this point, coherence might not be as important as it was at the beginning --the Book of God seems to be discontinuous because it is limited to no context. It is the Book of God above all and need not resemble the temporal and linear

discourse of men. They would probably have little or no problem forgetting about coherence since coherence for Muslims is merely a textual question, necessarily not related to the way they communicate with the Qur'an. Nevertheless, to a scholar who tends to remain outside the religious experience of reading the Book, coherence remains an open question. I simply have no claim to have dealt with coherence here; yet, I wish to have been able to argue that it is far more complicated than often discussed. Meanwhile, there is preliminary evidence, which indicates that non-linear order does not lead necessarily to fragmentariness as one might easily think of the reverse possibility where it affects coherence positively, tightening the textual ties between similar verses that are dispersed everywhere in the text. In a linear discourse, each sentence is related to the preceding and following sentences, whereas a subject like that of Moses or Abraham in the Qur'an is related to so many verses in different Suras. This distribution of a single subject over so many Suras, upon our reading, would open the boundaries of each Sura to many others thereby tightening different parts of the text together. But, all this remains to be investigated in future.

There were, as we noticed, good reasons to think of the Quran as a non-temporal text defined in distance from attributes of ordinary language. The results of this preliminary study indicate the necessity of turning to modern linguistic approaches in the study of the Quran.

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## قرآن به عنوان متنی غیر خطی: بازاندیشی پدیده انسجام

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ترتیب غیر خطی آیات قرآن کریم، اغلب از منظر بسیاری از محققان به منزله فقدان انسجام و پیوستگی و بازتاب نوعی پراکندگی محتوایی محسوب می‌شود. بنظر می‌رسد انسجام و عباراتی از این دست، مختصه بارز زبان قرآن، یعنی ماهیت غیر خطی آیات آن را از نظرها پنهان می‌سازد، ماهیتی که کلام قرآن را از زبان روزمره متمایز می‌سازد. نگارندگان بر این باورند که برای آشکار ساختن ماهیت غیر خطی آیات قرآن، باید پروردگاری را در نظر گرفت که برای سخن گفتن با مخاطبانش نه از زبان یک سخنگوی مرسوم که سخنانش به بافت زبانی وابسته است و آغاز و انجामी دارد، بلکه از زبان خاص خود بهره می‌گیرد. نباید از آفریدگار انتظار داشت تا همانند انسان سخن بگوید. بنابراین قرآن را بایستی متنی بی‌زمان و غیرخطی در نظر گرفت که ساخت‌زدایی نظام‌مند از بافت زبانی و مکانی و ترتیب خطی زبان، بازتاب منشا الهی آن است.

واژگان کلیدی: قرآن، خطی بودن، متن، ساختگرایی، انسجام

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