



the | inimitable | qur'an

# The Literary Arrangement of the Qur'an

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## **Final Arrangement Made Far in Advance**

What does a person do when he wants to make a product in which he needs to use several parts and components? The first thing is to review the parts and components at his disposal, making sure how they fit together; before making a plan that determines the place of every one of them. Making a plan cannot precede the finding out of the material at one's disposal; in the same way that a picture cannot be taken of what is unseen. To reverse these two steps is to force the human mind along an unfamiliar, very slippery way, without providing any sort of guidance. Have you ever seen anyone following such an unnatural route and managing to achieve his objective without difficulty?

Would any rational human being determine the exact point of every part of what he wants to produce before making sure what parts he has at his disposal and the exact measurements and qualities of each part? Should he start with such determination, would his initial decision be his final one, subject to no change or review? If he insists on following such a method, will he manage to achieve the sort of perfection a master craftsman aspires to achieve? No intelligent person would ever do that. If he does it in respect of certain stages in his work, relying on his intuition, his plans remain provisional. He will be ready to change it the moment he realises that a change is necessary or desirable. He will then go back to modify his first plan marginally here, substantially there, shifting an important component from one stage to another, or using it as a separate stage altogether. He will continue to review his material and modify his overall plan time and time again until he comes up with a final version that uses each part in its most suitable place.

Any arrangement that uses the parts before making sure the available material will be arbitrary, giving only an incomplete picture. The same applies to any structure that is not worked on the basis of complete and detailed knowledge of its parts. It will remain flimsy, liable to collapse at any time.

In fact when a human being begins to put together the component of any matter, he has to follow the natural way that determines the direction of anyone who has a definite objective in mind, whether physical or logical. If he needs to cover a number of steps, or climb upstairs, he simply cannot take a later step before he completes the preceding one, in the same way as he cannot climb a higher flight of stairs before a lower one. All this is determined by nature and applies to all our material and intellectual products. The rules apply in the same way to a builder, tailor, writer and poet.

Consider, if you will, this example. Suppose a man arrives in a vast plain where there is neither a building of any sort nor any building materials. Suddenly he feels an earthquake or a storm, and sees the top of a nearby mountain opening up and casting off some rocks and stones. After a short or long interval a similar event takes place, giving him a reasonable amount of iron, or silver or gold fragments. Do you think that any rational human being in this position would immediately resolve to build a whole town, using the material he has and that which he expects as a result of similar quakes and storms? Would he immediately begin to put his plan into effect and start the building process? How can he be certain that the phenomena gave him the initial material will happen again? If he does, how often? What sort of material would it give him every time, and in what quantities? How many buildings will it be possible for him to build, and in what system? How spacious will each building be? How many floors will it have? In what finish and decoration will it be? How much land is available to him for building?

In such total uncertainty, no rational human being would plan to build a small hut, let alone a large town. He would certainly not start to build as soon as he received his first few rocks.

Let us now imagine that a person will nevertheless undertake such an adventure, and that fate gives him what he needs of building materials to complete the project he has devised. Would he undertake another adventure, following an unnatural method of building, vowing to place each brick or stone he receives in its ultimate place, wherever that might happen to be, the moment he gets hold of it? Would he do that when he knows for certain that the bricks he receives come in various forms, sizes and strengths; some are light while other are heavy; and arrive in no definite order. He may have the material to be used in the terrace or the balcony before he receives the posts and beams that support the basic structure. He may have, at the same time, several incomplete parts to be used wide apart. Should he try to place each small part in its ultimate place the moment he gets it, that would inevitably give him scattered, incomplete and unrelated parts, with varying distances in between. He would have to bring some bits together while others be kept separate. He may even try to build the loft of one building before he lays its foundation, to start with the ceiling without first raising its support.

How can any human being embark on such an adventure and carry on with it to its completion without going back at any moment to amend his plan or move any part from its original position to a new, seemingly better one, or to give any part more support or new decoration? How is it possible that the moment he lays the last brick or strikes the last nail, we see a complete town, perfectly planned, with every palace, home, room, or brick right in its most suitable position, adding to the beauty of the whole construction. Should any part or

substance be moved from its place, a defect will be noticeable. Does that not constitute a huge challenge to the whole human race?

### **Planning the Whole Prior to Receiving the Parts**

Yet this has actually happened in the matter we are considering. The man in our example is the Prophet [peace be upon him], who was never taught how to read and write. The great city which he began to build ever since its first bricks were given to him is this first perfect book, the Qur'an. Ever since he received its early verses, he started to arrange its parts, confident that it would undoubtedly produce a complete and perfect whole. The palaces, rooms and bricks in our example are the surahs, passages and verses of the Qur'an.

The unexpected events that brought the man in our example the rocks and metals that went into the building of palaces and villas are the world events, social developments and religious and worldly problems that faced people time after time in their private or public affairs. A believer would ask about these to learn what he should know. A non-believer would use them to argue and dispute. In all these events Qur'anic revelations were given, a passage at a time, treating meanings that differed widely as would suit each case or occasion, in different lengths, and with varying tones ranging from the very lenient to the stiff and very hard. From these widely different passages, the sets known as surahs were formed, not on the basis of compatibility in each set, but allowing any number of passages, addressing any questions to join any set.

The totally unusual method followed in raising those buildings of the city in our example, haphazardly using their constituent parts, which is the third factor that makes the task impossible rather than hard, is also seen clearly in the Qur'an. The man who received its revelation did not wait until all its passages had been given to him. Indeed, he did not wait for a single surah to be completed before deciding on its arrangement. Whenever he received a passage or a single verse, he ordered that it should be placed in its particular slot in a well-defined position in its surah.

We should emphasise here that the revelation of verses and passages did not follow the order in which they did occur in the Qur'an. Many a surah was revealed, in whole or in parts, interspersed with the revelation of other passages in different surahs. Many a verse is placed towards the end of a surah despite its being revealed much earlier than the parts preceding it, and vice versa. Indeed, the revelation and arrangement of Qur'anic verses and passages were two separate matters following two different routes which hardly ever meet. This gives us a profoundly edifying aspect of the arrangement of this unique book.

If we look at each passage at the time of its revelation, and study the different aspects associated with its revelation: its timing, the events leading to it and the needs it satisfies, we are certain to conclude that each was topical at its particular time of revelation. Each one addressed a matter that happened to exist at a particular time. Prior to the event concerned, there was no indication suggesting that it was forthcoming. Hence, each passage is a complete whole that does not follow a pattern which puts it with other passages in a particular mould.

Let us at the same time consider how each passage is placed at the very moment of its revelation within a particular framework with either has been set in advance, or will be set at a later stage, and given a definite slot that occurs early or late within that framework. At the time of its revelation, a passage is ordered to be placed, say, at the end of a particular surah, while another passage, revealed after a short or long while, is placed in the same surah, after a given number of its verses. One passage may be ordered to be placed at the outset of a surah of which no part has yet been revealed, while a subsequent passage is placed within a surah the rest of which has long since been revealed.

When we consider such detailed instructions on the arrangement of passages and surahs we are bound to conclude that there is a complete and detailed plan assigning the position of each passage before they are all revealed. Indeed the arrangement is made before the reasons leading to the revelation of any passage occur, and even before the start of the preliminary causes of such events. Nevertheless, this whole, meticulously detailed plan of distribution and arrangement was made with full resolve and determination. Not a single verse or passage placed in a particular surah was later moved to a different one. Nor was a verse placed at the beginning or the end of a surah ever re-assigned a different position in that same surah at a later stage.

Such are the plain facts about the arrangement of the Qur'an as it was revealed in separate verses, passages and surahs over a period of 23 years. What does that tell us about its source?

### **An Arrangement Pointing Out the Author**

When we consider carefully the timing of the revelation of the Qur'anic passages and surahs and their arrangement, we are profoundly astonished. We almost believe what we see and hear. We then begin to ask ourselves for an explanation of this highly improbable phenomenon: is it not true that this new passage of revelation has just been heard as new, addressing a particular event which is its only concern? Yet it sounds as

though it is neither new nor separate from the rest. It seems as if it has been, along with the rest of the Qur'an, perfectly impressed on this man's mind long before he has recited it to us. It has been fully engraved on his heart before its composition in the words he recites. How else can it unite so perfectly and harmoniously parts and pieces that do not naturally come together?

Why has the person receiving these passages not left them separate as they were initially revealed? And when he decided to group them together, why has he not made them a single set? Or put them in equal or similar sets? What basis has he followed in their collation, distribution and arrangement in the present fashion, before they were complete in full or in part? Can all this be by mere coincidence? Certainly not; for each situation is clearly intended as it is. The deliberate intention is also clear that every group of passages or verses should be joined together in a separate unit of a particular length and arrangement. Or is it possible that all these arrangements, intended as they may be, do not follow a pre-determined order, but have come about as result of an experiment that follows a spontaneous thought? That could not be the case.

When each part was put in its position, the one who placed them never had a new thought or introduced any modification or re-arrangement. How then could he have determined his plan? And how could he have made his intention so clear in advance?

That is the line of questioning that we may ask ourselves. When we listen attentively to the logical answer, it will have to ruin in the following fashion: A person who dares to make such a detailed and perfectly planned design must be either a deeply ignorant one or one who has perfect and absolute knowledge that transcends human logic. There can be no other alternative. If he is one who has completed its perfect system of composition and arrangement before he has had complete and confirmed knowledge of the reasons behind the composition of each passage, its purpose, objectives and what it entails, then he merely resorts to guesswork and random preference. Such a person is a shameless impudent who dares to claim for himself what he does not have. His vain boasting will soon prove to be otiose. You only need to leave him alone for a while and the fallacy of his position will be made clearly apparent. It is not possible that ignorance should give birth to a solid system that lasts and flourishes.

If, on the other hand, this person has made his design on the basis of infallible knowledge, placing every verse and every passage in its perfectly designed position, then the system he comes up with must be unquestionably perfect and splendidly beautiful. But then the designer cannot be that human being, unless it has been imparted to him by a source well beyond his highest horizon. How is it possible for a human being,

subject as he is to the effect of time, to be in control of the nature of time? When a human being is completely ignorant of the causes and preliminaries of his action, can he be well aware of the details of its results and consequences? Can he be completely unaware, yet perfectly aware, of the one and same thing? Is it possible that he should be subject to, and in control of, the same thing, at the same time?

Has anyone ever seen or heard that a poet or a man of letters was able at the start of his literary career to collect all that he would ever say or write of poetry or prose on all future occasions right to the point of his death. He would then devise a plan for his future edition of his complete works which does not merely predict their themes and chapters, but perfectly estimates the number of poems and article its exact position in the ultimate edition. Then when in its future life the time arrives for any such work to be produced, he would put it in its pre-defined position without question. What is more is that his plan would score an unqualified success, showing the wisdom of his planning and fulfilling his dreams. His system will appear to all and sundry to be perfect, putting all his future works in their respective pre-arranged positions, changing nothing and modifying nothing.

If such hypothesis can ever be true of anyone, it will be true of the Prophet who delivered the Qur'an. But man remains what he is. A human being who is totally unaware of future events in his life that will prompt him to express his thoughts in prose or poetry is less likely to be aware of the actual texts of what he will say, and further unlikely to know the merit of each text. Indeed, when a person feels the urge to compose something he will choose one of two options. The first is to leave his thought as he has expressed it. He does the same with what he writes or says on subsequent occasions. When he has composed enough material he goes back to what he has written, putting like with like, separating what needs to put apart, classifying and arranging his work in a suitable and coherent order. The second option is to gather these texts according to their chronological order.

There is a third option, which is to leave them in groups. He will then work on each group separately, putting its parts together in a rigid and haphazard way, not allowing any piece to be shifted from its original place. He will still hope that in this way, he will come up with a well ordered and classified work, perfectly arranged into parts and chapters. What is more is that his work will show an unusual degree of coherence that puts every sentence, word and particle in its right place. Such an option will only produce the opposite of what one desires.

### **Perfect Unity of Whole and Part**

We have seen how human beings work when they try to produce a coherent whole out of separate parts, whether this be a literary piece or something different. This is totally different from the unity that is produced when parts of the Qur'anic revelations are joined together to form a single whole. Indeed, the Qur'anic order should have reflected absolutely no unity or coherence because of three different factors that should have made it totally disjointed. These are: divergent elements of the meaning, times of revelation separated by long or short periods, and widely different situations to be addressed on each occasion.

Let us now consider whether these factors and their combined effect have diminished in any way the coherent order of any surah that has been composed in such a manner. The Arabs who were challenged to produce a single surah like the Qur'an would have jumped at the opportunity to detract from the Qur'an, had they found any flaw in the composition of a single surah. They would have needed no temptation to have a go at it. Literary critics of the highest calibre in successive generations have been citing examples from the Qur'an to illustrate the perfect harmony of composition when it addresses different meanings or changes styles and modes of expression.

We for our part should study carefully the construction of the Qur'an and how its arrangement has been made so as to produce such perfect structure to merit God's description of it: 'A discourse in the Arabic tongue, free of all deviousness.' (39:28). Take any one of the many surahs of the Qur'an that tackle more than one purpose. Indeed, these are the majority. Now review it very carefully, stage by stage, and then contemplate it again, and yet again: how it begins, and how it ends. How it reflects the contrast and balance between its constituent parts. How it relates its main themes to each other. And how its premises lead to its conclusions, and the early parts lead to those that follow.

I maintain that no one will ever find in the line of the meanings it portrays or in the construction of its verses and sentences anything to indicate whether it was revealed all on the same occasion or on several occasions. You will imagine that each of the seven longest surahs was revealed in total on one occasion, but then you will have to acknowledge the fact that most of them were revealed one passage at a time. In fact, this applies to all surahs, long and short as they may be, which have been revealed in parts. In fact, very short surahs, like Surah 93, 96 and 107 were each revealed in two parts, on two different occasions. Of the longest 7 surahs, perhaps Surah 6 was revealed on one occasion, as scholars suggest. But then the method of moving from one meaning to another in Surah 6 and the surahs revealed in several occasions is the same.

It may be said that although a surah might have been put together after its parts were revealed separately, these parts were in one whole unit prior to their separate revelation. This would be the same as, say, a historic building which needs to be moved as it is from one place to another. Its detailed dimensions are measured and it's every stone or brick is given a number before it is dismantled. In this way, every little part is assigned its exact position. When it is reconstructed, it regains its exact shape and acquires an even more solid foundation.

When we read a long surah that was revealed in a number of passages over a long period of time, an ignorant person may think that it is no more than an assortment of laboured meanings and a random collection of syntactic structures. But when you examine it very carefully you will find it to be a solid structure bringing together the main purposes in an elaborate system which lays down every aspect, giving it its sections and branches which are then further divided into long or short subdivisions. When you move from one part of the surah to another, you feel as if you are looking at the rooms and the halls of one building that has been designed by a single architect who gave it his whole attention until the building was completed. You will not feel any mismatch in the allocation of space or the distribution of amenities. Nor will you sense any split as you move from one passage to another. Indeed, the reverse is true. You will feel perfect unity between the different types and consummate harmony between the constituent parts of each type. What is more is that all this has been achieved without recourse to anything apart from the intended purposes themselves. What helps to bring it about are the ease of introduction and the fine treatment at the beginning, middle and completion of every purpose. Thus, you see a direct link between separate parts and perfect harmony between distinct identities.

But then we do not give a proper description of the unity of the Qur'anic surahs when we compare them to a single building with rooms and halls conforming to the same design. This is an adequate description. The parts and passages of each surah are welded together and brought into perfect harmony in the same way as the organs of the human body. Between each two passages there is an inherent link uniting them, in the same way as two bones meet at a joint with the mass of connective tissues and ligaments completing the linkage, then the two organs supported by two bones are linked by arteries and nerves. Beyond that, the whole surah moves in the same direction to fulfil a particular purpose, just like we see the human body having a single stature, while all its organs perform different biological functions that help to complete a single purpose.

Remember that the parts and elements that ensure the unity of each surah were related to events that had not all taken place at the time of the revelation of that surah in the Qur'an, nor were they expected to happen at

the outset of its revelation. Moreover, the perfection of that unity required that all these events and causes must, by necessity, take place at their appointed and allocated time so that the Qur'an might have the opportunity to address them. The question that must be asked here is: what dictated the course of events so as to make it serve the purpose of these passages and to ensure that every single event should take place at the time of revelation of the Qur'an? Should a single event have failed to materialise at the time, the whole system giving the Qur'an its unity and harmony would have been disrupted. This would have given us at least one surah without a proper opening or conclusion or with a split in the middle.

The fact that cosmic events have been made to serve the structure of these literary passages and ensure their perfect unity provides clear evidence that both the literary speech and the actual event have come from the same source. Indeed, the One whose knowledge has given these words is the One whose will has produced those events and creatures. They are all from God, whose will is always done and whose verdict is final. All glory belongs to Him.

### **The Details and the Whole in the Qur'anic Picture**

Let us now suppose that the man who has given us the Qur'an could have been able to predict with perfect accuracy all future events, important and trivial, that would take place through the remainder of his own life. Let us further imagine that he was also able to determine what teachings of the Qur'an would be needed to address these future events. The question to be asked here is: how could he have predicted which teachings would go with which parts and passages, so as to be ready to receive each part as it is revealed and give its appropriate and firm link that fits it most perfectly in its pre-assigned slot? Why was it then that when each passage was revealed it found itself in its most suitable position, perfectly comfortable with its adjoining parts? The space assigned to it is neither too narrow to give a laboured impression, nor too loose to weaken its links with the rest. It fits in like the final piece in a jigsaw puzzle. There was never a need to make even the slightest change, or rearrangement, or to delete or add even a particle in the preceding passage to allow the new one to slot in.

Indeed, how could that man have known each part and to what unit or group it belonged? How could he have known at what position in that unit it would be placed, well before he became aware of the other parts of the unit? How is it that when the separate parts given at random are all set in their respective positions, assigned to them in advance, the curtain is raised and we see every surah like a beauty queen, perfectly moulded, tastefully adorned?

What elaborate design, what perfect forethought, and what faultless knowledge that never forgets, hesitates or errs, has prepared for such a broad assortment of material its perfect design, and directed each piece of it to its assigned slot? How come that when each has taken its place according to the advance design, the result is a necklace in which each gemstone is perfectly placed so as to add to the superb beauty of the necklace while losing nothing of its own attraction.

We all know that human knowledge always looks at what it has completed and says: 'If I were to begin anew, I would have changed this plan for that, or started with this idea instead of that.' Such knowledge simply cannot produce a perfect design in advance of the events to which it applies. This, in itself, is an irrefutable proof that the Qur'an is made by no human being. Its author is the One whose knowledge is perfect, absolute, and independent of time. "Had [the Qur'an] issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many inner contradiction." (4:82)