

Quranic Architecture, the Chambered Nautilus, and the Circle of Time

By Sibam Karami

One important aspect of the Quran which has rarely if ever been properly studied, or even considered as having significance, is the way it is organized and presented, what I call its “architecture.” In one of the most basic features of that architecture, the 114 Quranic chapters, called *surahs* (which means “enclosures”), are placed roughly in order from the longest to the shortest, with the notable exception of the very first surah, *Al-Fatiba* or “The Opening,” with only seven *ayat* (a term used in reference to Quranic verses, also “signs” or “miracles,” whose singular form is *aya*). It is also the essential opening *du’a* or supplication in Islamic canonical prayer or *salat*, and a “key/opener” (another meaning of *fatiba*) to the Quran itself. The very next surah, *Al-Baqara* or “The Cow,” is by far the longest and most comprehensive in the Quran, approximately one-twelfth of the whole book, presenting an overall view of the Islamic faith: a history of *Bani Israel* (descendants of Israel/Jacob) led by Prophet Musa (Moses) and its lessons, often in what *not* to do, for the nascent Muslim nation led by Prophet Mohammad; revelations about Allah’s nature; Divine Law detailed and other guidance; and the difference between the faithful, disbelievers, and hypocrites. The surahs that follow gradually (and unevenly) decrease in size until we reach the very shortest surahs, ending with the short (but not shortest) surah entitled *Al-Nass* or “People.”

This order in gradually descending-sized surahs suggests a possible shape: the scroll or spiral, in which outer sections would be larger than inner ones. And such an arrangement has, as this essay shall present, profound implications about the meaning and nature of time and timelessness or eternity, the role of faith in that intersection, and can also play a role in developing a more reliable *tafseer* or interpretation of the Quran itself. Perhaps the most immediate benefit is the vision it provides for us to see the Quran as a whole in one glance, in a context familiar to us, from which we can “zoom in” to the ayat and surahs we need to study, giving the reader a sense of each surah’s place in the whole, which also aids as a graphic in memorization and locating specific portions of the Quran. As this essay shall examine, such architecture also reveals a symbolic “calendar” of days, months, and years, giving us, in our own time-bound world, keys and openings to Allah the Exalted and His timeless realm, for every time/season/moment in our most valuable resource, our limited term or lifespan.

Some scholars considered this final arrangement of surahs and ayat to have been the work of scribes, but others say it was sent down directly from Allah the Exalted to Prophet Mohammad as an integral part of the Quran. Even so, no particular significance has been attached to this order per se, some considering it Allah’s wisdom and therefore an inappropriate subject for speculation; others, seeing sufficient cohesive structure in the text itself (which indeed it has), found no reason to speculate about this; and yet others, seeing no apparent chronological or thematic order in the usual sense, leaving it at that or even (among orientalist) seeing this as a possible flaw. The Quran itself addresses this issue, clarifying that the order and arrangement of the Quran is directly ordained by Allah the Exalted.

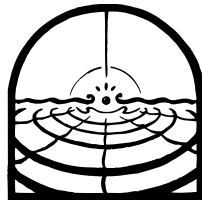
inna ‘alaynā jam‘abu waqur‘ānah

Indeed, upon Us is its collection and its recitation.

(*Surat Al-Qiyama* 75:17)

Allah here declares that it is He alone who “collected” the Quran together in its present and eternal arrangement — determining its exact and final order and placement, not only for the surahs but for every detail of the text — and its “recitation,” which also implies dissemination, in that by reciting the Quran, initially by the Prophet Mohammad, those who recite it are disseminating it to those who listen. Thus we

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