Introduction to Surah Group Three

Islahi singles out Surah *An Nur* from the fifteen Surahs of Group Three and highlights verse 55 because it expresses the theme (‘umud) in a characteristic way:

God has promised those of you who have attained to faith and do righteous deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, even as He caused (some of) those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has been pleased to bestow on them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a sense of security.

Islahi says that the above verse presents the conditions that have been laid down so that the believers will enjoy success and prosperity (*falah*, vol. 4, p. 9). These conditions flow from the ethical demands of faith (*akhlaq o kirdar ke sath mashrut hai jo iman ka lazmi maqtaza hai*, ibid) that will distinguish a believing community (*muminana mu'ashrah*, ibid) from an unbelieving one (*kafirana mu'ashrah*, ibid).

Furthermore, Islahi says that each of the fifteen Surahs of the Group has its own characteristic way of expressing the overall theme (‘umud) of the whole Group:

Repeated reflection on the Surahs of this Group gives one the clear impression that they revolve around one truth, though they approach it from different aspects and express it in different ways. A brief statement of this truth would be to say that the struggle between truth and falsity that took place at the instigation of the Prophet will result in victory for the Prophet and for his followers and defeat and humiliation for his opponents, the Quraysh (*ahl iman ki kamyabi o fathmandi aur quraysh ki zillat o hazimat par mantahi hogi*, ibid, p.10).

Islahi considers Surah Group Three to be pronouncing a warning for the Quraysh and proclaiming good news for the Prophet and his followers (ibid). Unless the Quraysh change their evil ways, they will experience the same fate as the nations that have gone before them. The Quraysh will find ample evidence for the serious nature of this warning from the history related in Surah Group Three, as well as from reflecting on the many indications that
arise out of their own reason and nature as well as from observing the living beings around them and the natural laws and history of the universe (quraysh par 'aql o fitrat aur afaq o anfus ke dalail aur tarikh o nizam kainat ke shawahid se ye bat wazeh ki gayi hai, ibid). Similarly, provided that they remain firmly committed to the truth and are patient in adversity, the Prophet and his followers may be quite certain of their eventual success (isi tarah nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ke sahaba ko sabr o istiqamat aur taqwa ki talqin farmai gayi hai ke jis haq ko le kar tum uthe ho injamkar ki kamyabi aur ferozmandi isi ka hissah hai, ibid). The evidence supporting the certainty of their victory is just as available for them as it is for their opponents, the Quraysh. Islahi says that “the way of God” (sumnat ilahi) assures those who persevere in times of adversity that they will have victory and success (sumnat ilahi ye hai ke haq ko ghalbah aur kamyabi ki manzil tak pahunchne ke liye azmaish ke mukhtalif marhalon se guzarna parta hai, ibid).

The key question concerns the nature and the extent of this victory. Besides the claim of victory for believers in the next world, does this victory also refer to the capitulation of Mecca and the success and prosperity of the believers in this world, as Islahi claims it does? Is verse 55 of Surah An Nur (quoted above) a reference to the historical victory of the Muslims in Mecca? Islahi says that those who persevere in the way of God will experience success in this world as well as in the next (dunya aur akhirat donon mein kamyabi tumhara hi hissah hai, ibid). It is precisely this point that Islahi wants to highlight by providing a selection of verses taken from Surah Group Three, namely, that God promises prosperity in this world before providing an even greater reward in the world to come. In fact, Islahi articulates the main message ('umud) of Surah Group Three in terms of God’s promise to provide some form of success and victory for believers in this world while holding a severe punishment in store for unbelievers.

Surah Yunus, the first Surah of Group Three, illustrates the theme ('umud) of the whole Surah Group in a phrase from verse 2:

Warn all mankind, and give unto those who have attained to faith the glad tiding that in their Sustainer’s sight they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere.

Islahi comments that this verse presents the theme ('umud) in very clear words (is surah ka 'umud nihayat jami' alfaz mein . . . wazeh ho raha hai, ibid, p. 10).
In verse 49 of the Surah Hud, the same theme ('umud) is expressed in the different words:

Be, then, (like Noah,) patient in adversity – for, behold, the future belongs to the God-conscious!

Surah Yusuf expresses the same theme in verse 90:

Verily, if one is conscious of Him and patient in adversity – behold, God does not fail to replete the doers of good!

In the Surah Ar R’ad, the same theme is presented with some detail in verse 22 (kisi qadar tafsil bhi a gayi hai, ibid, p. 11):

Who are patient in adversity out of a longing for their Sustainer’s countenance, and are constant in prayer, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them as sustenance, and (who) repel evil with good. It is these that shall find their fulfillment in the hereafter.

Similarly, Surah Ibrahim, verse 27, guarantees the believers steadfastness in this world and in the next (dunya aur akhirat donon mein ahl iman ke sabit qadam ka zimn hai, ibid):

God grants firmness unto those who have attained to faith through the word that is unshakably true in the life of this world as well as in the life to come; but the wrongdoers He lets go astray: for God does whatever He wills.

Surah An Nahl has the following words in verse 30 to illustrate the same theme:

Good fortune awaits, in this world, all who persevere in doing good; but their ultimate end will be far better still: for, how excellent indeed will be the state of the God-conscious (in the life to come)!

Furthermore, Islahi says that in Surah Al Isra (or Surah Bani Israil) those who choose the way of God will hear the glad tidings of success (fath) in this world and in the next (jin logon ne ye rah ikhtiyar kar li hai dunya aur akhirat ki fatah ki basharat inhi ke liye hai, ibid). His certainty is based on verses 9-10:

Verily, this Qur’an shows the way to all that is most upright, and gives the believers who do good deeds the glad tiding that theirs will be a great reward; and (it announces, too), that We have readied grievous suffering for those who will not believe in the life to come.
According to Islahi, another illustration of this theme is to be found in Surah *Al Anbiya*, verse 105:

> We laid it down in all the books of divine wisdom that My righteous servants shall inherit the earth.\(^7^8\)

Finally, verse 55 of Surah *An Nur*, the last Surah of Group Three, presents the same message in a most clear fashion (*ye basharat wazeh se wazeh tar ho gayi hai*, ibid, p. 12):

> God has promised those of you who have attained to faith and do righteous deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, even as He caused (some of) those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has been pleased to bestow on them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a sense of security.

The purpose of highlighting the above verses is to present the general mood (*'am mazaj*, ibid) of Surah Group Three. Islahi asserts that the theme of each specific Surah as well as its characteristic way of argumentation will all become easy to understand once we have analyzed the meaning of the Surah (*har surah ka 'umud aur bahs o istadlal mein is ka sahih rukh matalib ke tajziyah se samne ayega*, ibid).

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\(^*\) A comparable verse is to be found in Surah *Al Baqarah*, verse 30: “And lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: ‘Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it’.”
Surah Yunus

Introduction

Since Surah Yunus is the first Surah of Group Three, Islahi devotes his opening remarks to the theme (‘umud) of the whole of Surah Group Three, which he illustrates with a verse from almost each Surah in this Surah Group. I have already presented this list of verses in my introduction to Surah Group Three (above).

As for Surah Yunus, Islahi says the theme (‘umud) of this Surah is expressed quite clearly in the phrase from verse 2:

Warn all mankind, and give unto those who have attained to faith the glad tiding that in their Sustainer’s sight they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere.

The key phrase in this sentence, as far as the ‘umud is concerned, is the phrase “they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere” (anna lahum qadama sidqin), which Islahi translates as “having precedence” or “surpassing in status” (bari paligah hai, vol. 4, p. 11).

Islahi says that the ‘umud, as well as the characteristic process of argumentation of each Surah will emerge clearly only after an analysis has been made of the meaning of the Surah as a whole (matalib ka tajaziyah, ibid, p. 12). But if Islahi can provide such an analysis of the meaning of the whole Surah in a few pages (as he claims to do at the beginning of his commentary on each Surah), it would seem that further contextual analysis is superfluous. Of what importance is the contextual study that follows?

However, even after reading Islahi’s analysis of the meaning of the Surah as a whole, the reader is still left wondering how the phrase “they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere” (anna lahum qadama sidqin) of verse 2 should be understood. If the words are translated in a physical or in a material sense, the phrase would express the success and prosperity promised to believers in this world, which is in keeping with the overall theme (‘umud) of the Surah Group. Naturally, Islahi would prefer his own translation because it fits in better with the overall theme of the Surah Group.

79 As Muhammad Asad says, the phrase could also be understood in a more personal, spiritual way as “denoting a concord between what a person actually conceives in his mind or feels and what he expresses by word, deed or attitude – in other words, complete sincerity”. Asad (1980), p. 287, note 4.
Victory in This World and in the Next

Islahi finds the theme (‘umud) of the Surah expressed repeatedly in several of its verses. Right at the start of the Surah, in its second verse (already quoted above), we find a phrase that Islahi says describes the prominent and respected status of the believers (‘izzat ka maqam, martaba buland, unchi paligah aur lazawal sar farazi, ibid, p. 22). According to Islahi, the fact that this verse stresses glad tidings for the believers is in keeping with the nature of Surah Group Three (is grup ki tamam suraton mein numayan pahlu ahl iman ke liye basharat hi ka hai, ibid). Surah Group Three gives expression to the triumph of God, his Prophets and their disciples.

However, Islahi does not completely dispel the ambiguity surrounding his concept of victory in this world. He sometimes suggests that victory will occur only in the next world. For instance, Islahi finds an allusion to the theme of success and prosperity in verse 103:

We save Our apostles and those who have attained to faith.

Islahi says the phrase expresses the success that the believers will eventually experience (bilakhir allah ta‘ala apne rasulon aur ahl iman ko kamyabi ‘ata farmata hai, ibid, p. 94), thereby suggesting that the success these verses promise to the believers is a success that comes only “at the end” (bilakhir), that is, in the next world.

In spite of this ambiguity, Islahi stresses that the glad tidings concern life in this world. As verse 64 says:

For them there is the glad tiding (of happiness) in the life of this world and in the life to come; (and since) nothing could ever alter (the outcome of) God’s promises, this, this is the triumph supreme!

Islahi understands the verse to mean that victory is to be achieved in this world as well (is dunya mein bhi lazman ghalba hasil hota hai, ibid, p. 66). Noting that victory has a separate connotation for apostles and for prophets (in anbiya ka ma‘ama jo sirf nabi they, rasul nahin they, is se alag hai, ibid), Islahi says that the glad tiding mentioned in the last sentence of verse 87:

And give thou (O Moses) the glad tiding (of God’s succour) to all believers,

had already been announced in verse 2 of the same Surah (is basharat ka zikr ayat 2 mein guzar chuka hai, ibid, p. 81):
Warn all mankind, and give unto those who have attained to faith the 
glad tiding that in their Sustainer’s sight they surpass all others in that 
they are completely sincere.

Hence, he claims that both verses refer to the victory of believers in this 
world and in the next (dunya aur akhirat donon mein fauz o falah, ibid).

Furthermore, according to Islahi, there is a reference to the victory of the 
believers in this world in verse 17:

Verily, those who are lost in sin will never attain to a happy state.

Islahi reminds the reader that the background to this verse concerns the 
success of truth in the struggle between truth and falsity (haq o batil ki jo 
kashmakash barpa hoti hai wo lazman haq ke ghalba par muntahi hoti hai, 
ibid, p. 33) and concludes that the victory must take place in this world (akhirat se pahli is dunya mein bhi ghalba lazmi hai, ibid). 

Moreover, the glad tidings the Israelites received are described in verse 93:

And (thereafter), indeed, We assigned unto the children of Israel a 
most goodly abode, and provided for them sustenance out of the good 
things of life.

Islahi says that the verse refers to the way God established the Israelites in 
the Promised Land (bani israil ko apne muntakhab kardah ‘alage mein 
iqtidar o istahqam bakhsha, ibid, p. 85), understanding the verse as referring 
to the physical victory that took place in history.

It seems clear that Islahi is stressing the physical, historical aspect of victory 
that took place in this world. Two questions remain unanswered. The first 
is whether this victory could be understood in a more spiritual and emotional 
sense, instead of the physical, material or prima facie sense emphasized by 
Islahi. The other question concerns the sense in which this victory could 
also occur in the contemporary world of the reader.

The Appeal to Reason

Another way that Islahi tries to find a unity in the Surah is through his own 
peculiar approach to reason. The argument seems to be that the Surah itself 
must be coherent because it points to the harmony and cohesiveness of the 
universe, which any rational person will readily accept (koi salim al’aql aur 
koi mustaqim alfitrat insan, ibid, p. 25). Verse 3 says:

Verily, your Sustainer is God, who has created the heavens and the 
earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne of His 
almightiness, governing all that exists.
Islahi concludes from this verse that the universe is not the result of an accident (ittifaqi hadse ke taur par zahur mein nahin a gayi hai, ibid, p. 23). Any reasonable observer will be able to draw the conclusion that the world is not a place for empty pastimes (na ye kisi kalindare ka khel tamasha hai, ibid) but has been entrusted to mankind for a purpose (insan jo is kainat mein khilafa ki haisiyat rakhta hai . . . is ke samne ek aisa din aye jis mein wo log pure insaf ke sath apne 'amal ka silah payen, ibid). In other words, Islahi says that mankind’s moral responsibility can be rationally deduced from the evidence available in the universe. Any other conclusion would work against reason and nature (jo 'aql o fitrat aur khud tumhare apne musallama ke khilaf hai, ibid). In fact, Islahi finds the basic purpose of the universe expressed in the following phrase from verse 4:

He creates (man) in the first instance, and then brings him forth anew to the end that He may reward with equity all who attain to faith and do righteous deeds.

Islahi says that the basic purpose of the coming day of judgment is to reward mankind for his good deeds (qiyamat ka asl maqsud dar haqiqat ahl iman ko jaza dena hai, ibid, p. 24). The universe cannot continue as it is without the certainty of human accountability on the Last Day (ye sari kudrat o hikmat bemaqsud o beghayat ho jati hai, ibid, p. 25). Islahi says the same subject was dealt with in verse 191 of Surah Al 'Imran (ibid, p. 26). In short, the order of the universe and man’s accountability must be evident to any reflective person (is nazam par jo shakhs bhi gaur karti hai, ibid).

It is clear that the Surah does draw our attention to the abundant evidence available in the universe for the existence of a Creator and, subsequently, to the coming accountability on the Last Day. But it seems to me that the Surah does not present this message in such a logical, rational way that to deny it would simply amount to nonsense. Instead, the Surah expects a person to be sensitive enough to recognize all this evidence as pointing to the work of a benevolent Creator and Sustainer. Islahi tends to reduce the text of the Surah to a philosophical treatise. It is significant that he rejects modern philosophy as contrary to the message of the Qur’an and that he wrote his own book on the philosophy of the Qur’an.80

Islahi provides an illustration of his own approach to philosophy in his comment on verse 19 of the present Surah:

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80 Amin Ahsan Islahi, Haqiqat Tauhid, known in English translation as The Philosophy of the Qur’an.
And (know that) all mankind were once but one single community, and only later did they begin to hold divergent views. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled (from the outset).

According to Islahi, modern philosophers hold that mankind gradually developed from holding divergent opinions about God to a monotheistic view (jadid falsafion ke is nazariya . . . ke insan ne din ka aghaz shirk se kia phir darja badarja irtiqa karte hue tauhid tak pahuncha, ibid, p. 35). But the Qur’an teaches the opposite view, saying that mankind lost his initial, monotheistic understanding of God (quran is ke bilkul bar’aks ye kahta hai ke khuda ne sharu’ hi se insan ko tauhid ki ta’lim di, ibid). Islahi says that the various intellectual approaches of mankind today diverge from the basic unity that was established at the beginning (aj shirk o zulalat ke mukhtalif tariqon ki majjudgi . . . gumrahon ki apni ijad se zahur mein aye hain, ibid). Consequently, Islahi does not have a positive opinion of the development of philosophy, preferring the uniform way of thinking that was the original characteristic of mankind. His preference for a uniform way of thinking influences his approach to the present Surah, leading to a narrow use of reason and rationality as the only way to understand the verses about the cohesiveness of the universe and the day of accountability.

A similar understanding emerges from Islahi’s views on verse 93 concerning the Jews:

And it was not until knowledge (of God’s revelation) was vouchsafed to them that they began to hold divergent views.

Islahi says that, because of their ungratefulness for God’s blessings, the Jews developed all kinds of divergent views with regard to religion and the Torah (allah ke din aur is ki kitab o shar’ ke ma’amle mein . . . tarah tarah ke ikhtilafat paida kar ke payi hui haqiqat gum kar di, ibid, p. 85). Yet divergent views with regard to religion and the Torah need not be a sign of ungratefulness. Differences of opinion in these matters will always come with intellectual involvement and inquiry into the message of God.81

A further indication of Islahi’s concept of rational inquiry emerges from his opening remarks to verses 71-93 of the present Surah. Islahi says that the

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81 Muhammad Asad quotes Razi as saying: “The people of Moses remained of one religious persuasion (‘ala millah wahidah) and of one opinion, without any disagreement, until they began to study the Torah: whereupon they became aware of the (various) problems and obligations involved, and disagreements (regarding their interpretation) arose among them. And so God makes it clear (in the above Qur’an-verse) that this kind of disagreement is inevitable (la hudud) and will always occur in the life of this world”. Asad (1980), p. 306, note 114.
previous verses expressed the message through an appeal to reason and to nature (‘aql o fitrat ke dalail se, ibid, p. 69) whereas the following verses seek to confirm the same truths with an appeal to history (inhi haqaiq ko tarikh ki roshni mein wazeh karna hai jo upar ‘aql o fitrat ke dalail se mubaran kiye gaye hain, ibid). Islahi seems to be advocating the separation of rational and historical inquiry. But historical discourse must appeal to reason and nature as well. Islahi presumes that rational discourse is distinct from historical discourse without giving any further justification for such a distinction.

Moreover, he sees no significant difference between the various historical accounts related in these verses, except the references to details of time and place (farq agar hai to nam o maqam aur zamane ka hai, ibid). Islahi says that one can disregard such details of time and place in order to grasp the meaning of these historical accounts (asl dastan is qadr baham digar mushaba hai ke nam o maqam ke farq ko nazар andaz kar dijiye to sre se koi farq hi nahin rah jata, ibid). But if the details of these historical accounts are not very significant for their meaning, one could draw the conclusion that these historical accounts function simply as parables and must be understood in the way we understand parables.

Islahi says that the third person is used in the parables of verses 22-23 because this is the usual style of parables (yahan se uslub ghaih ka ho gaya, is liye ke ye tamsil hai aur tamsil ke liye uslub-i-bayan ‘umumi hi mauzun aur mu’assir hota hai, ibid, p. 40). Just as he had done earlier to establish a direct link between a parable and the Jews (cf. Surah Group One), in these verses Islahi finds a direct link between the parables and the Quraysh, despite the words: “O men!” in verse 23 (ayuha nas mein khitab phir quraysh se ho gaya, ibid, p. 40). However, Islahi also detects a general truth conveyed by the parable (isi haqiqat ko insani zindagi ke ek ‘amata al warud waqe’ se misal de kar samjhaya hai, ibid). Islahi does not apply the further parable, mentioned in verse 24, to any specific group but proceeds to analyze the parable in his own peculiar, rationalistic way (cf. ibid, p. 42).

Moreover, from the use of the word “story” in verse 71: “And convey unto them the story of Noah”, Islahi argues that this word indicates the occurrence of an important event and distinguishes it from an historical style of writing (is lafz ke ist’emal se yahan pata chalta hai ke maqsud nuh aur qaum nuh ki zindaqi ke kisi ahm maur aur kisi faislakun waqe’ ki sarguzasht sunana hai. muarikhon ki tarz ki mujarad dastan sarai pesh nazar nahin hai,
In other words, Islahi denies that the correct meaning of an event can be derived from historical writing. Yet, surprisingly, Islahi still finds the historical context of this event significant and refers to his earlier discussion of the same historical context in verses 60-64 of Surah Al A’raf (is ke mahl waqu’a aur is ke tahmini zamana ke taraf isharah kar chuke hain (ibid)).

Similarly, his frequent references to the complete and adequate presentation of arguments by a Prophet (for example, the concept itimam hujjat is mentioned three times on p. 60 alone) raises further questions about the kind of conditions Islahi would lay down for the argument to be completely convincing. Islahi never discusses the criteria for such a perfect presentation of the arguments for religion (din), simply stating that it is in the nature of a Messenger of God (rasul) to achieve such a level of presentation (hazrat musa aur hazrat harun faraun aur is ke a’yan ke pas rasul ke haisiyat se gaye they is wajh se unhone lazman in ke upar allah ki hujjat tamam ki. is ke baghair rasul ka mishan pura nahin hota, ibid, p. 76). Islahi rejects the opinion of those who say that Moses was simply a political leader who led his people to freedom (sirf bani israil ki azadi ka mutalba kiya, ibid). More than being a freedom fighter, Moses was a Prophet who invited his people to faith and to Islam (iman o islam ki . . . da’awat, ibid). Only a Prophet has the capacity to present arguments that will lead the people to faith and to Islam.

In short, Islahi argues that it would be irrational to reject the Prophet’s way of reasoning. Similarly, the believer’s acceptance of the Prophet’s message is a rational activity (allah ta’ala iman o hidayat ki rah inhi logon par kulta hai jo apne ‘aql o dil ki salahiyat se faidah utale hain, ibid, p. 49). Islahi goes on to describe those who do not use their reason (jo log ‘aql o fitrat ko takra kar, ibid) as people who tend to follow their own passions and who are thereby lost (cf. ibid). Islahi wants to promote the correct use of reason in the life of a believer and in understanding the Qur’an. The question remains as to how Islahi understands the concept “reasoning person” when he refers to the person who uses his reason (‘aql wo hai jo dusron ke halat se sabaq le, ibid. p. 42). Islahi does not explain what kind of lessons a reasonable person should take from his environment.
The Social Context

Another key that Islahi uses to unlock the meaning of the Surah is to investigate the social conditions in which it was revealed. According to Islahi, these conditions will be evident to the reader from the text itself. He begins by identifying the addressees of the text. Verse 12 says:

For (thus it is:) when affliction befalls man, he cries out unto Us, whether he be lying on his side or sitting or standing

The verse refers to the Quraysh (quraysh ko mukhatab kar ke, ibid, p. 32) even though the verse uses a general word for mankind (insan ka lafz har chand ‘am hai lekin is se murad wohi mutamarrid din quraysh hain, ibid, p. 31). Similarly, verse 21 refers to “such people” (an nas) but Islahi claims the words refer to the Quraysh (ye hal to quraysh hi ka bayan ho raha hai, ibid, p. 39). The Qur'an uses a style that expresses disregard for the Quraysh (be iltifati ka izhar, ibid, p. 39). The same style is used to indicate that this characteristic of the Quraysh was “common to all” (ye haqiqat bhi samne a jaye ke is bab khas mein jo hal in ka hai wohi hal sab ka hai, ibid). But it is not clear to whom Islahi is referring when he says that this characteristic of the Quraysh was “common to all”. Is it common to all mankind in a general sense or was it common to all people living at the time of revelation? A further illustration of this question can be found in the words “O men!” from verse 23, which would seem to refer to people in general:

O men! All your outrageous deeds are bound to fall back upon your own selves!

But Islahi says that this verse refers specifically to the Quraysh (ye khitab phir quraysh se ho gaya, ibid, p. 40). In fact, Islahi is quite certain that, after the parable told about the ships at sea, the Surah again specifically addresses the Quraysh (tamsil ke ba’d ye quraysh ko phir khitab kiya hai, ibid, p. 41).

Moreover, Islahi has his own particular way of explaining the context of the words from verse 16:

Indeed, a whole lifetime have I dwelt among you ere this (revelation came to me): will you not, then, use your reason?

He says that the phrase expresses the way the Prophet defended himself before the Quraysh by claiming that he neither showed pretensions to leadership nor claimed to have high-sounding visions (kab tum ne mere
Ibid, p. 33). Again, verse 17 asks:

And who could be more wicked than they who attribute their own lying inventions to God or give the lie to His messages?

Islahi says the question refers to the authentic character of the Prophet himself (agar main sacha hun, ibid). Islahi finds a connection between these two verses by seeing them as emerging from the social environment in which the Prophet’s identity was being questioned.

Furthermore, Islahi explains many verses of the Surah by referring to the Arab practices of the period. He claims verses 48-49 refer to the expectations of the Arabs that their gods would give them priority on Judgment Day (qiyamat hui to in ke dewi dwata waham in ka khair maqadam karenge, ibid, p. 47) because these imaginary deities (farzi ma’budon, ibid, p. 49) do the work of intercession (maz’uma sharka aur shaf’a, ibid, p. 63). Islahi draws on the customs and practices of the Arabs (ahl ‘arab ke ‘aqaid, ibid, p. 48) to situate these verses in their proper context. For example, verse 68 refers to the practice of the Arabs to consider the angels as sons and daughters of God (mushriqin ‘arab . . . farishton ko khuda ki betiyan kahte they, ibid, p. 68).

Islahi explains other verses in terms of the difficult situation created by the opponents of the Prophet and his followers. Hence, verse 65 has a message of consolation:

And be not grieved by the sayings of those (who deny the truth). Behold, all might and glory belong to God alone: He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing.

Islahi conjectures that the opponents of the Prophet and his followers must have rejected the claims of eventual success they were making (in ayat ke nuzul ke daur mein musalmanon ka jo hal tha is ke lihaz se tamakan aur ghalba ki wo basharat . . . kuffar ke liye tanz o istahza ka mauzu ban sakti thi, ibid, p. 66). These opponents ridiculed the Muslims’ hope of victory as just a dream (hukumat o saltanat ke khwab dekh rahe hain, ibid). Hence, these verses console not only the Prophet but his companions as well (tasalli o basharat peghambar hi ke liye makhshus nahin hai balke ap ke satiyon ke liye bhi hai, ibid, p. 65). Islahi clarifies many passages of the Surah by resorting to this need for consolation and encouragement by the Muslims of
the time. Furthermore, we have another example of the way Islahi finds the social context within the text when Islahi describes the period before the *hijrah* as one of such anarchy that the Muslims were advised to pray in one another’s houses, as related in verse 87 (is ‘aburi daur mein inhi gharon ko ‘arzi taur par qibla ki haisiyat de di gayi, ibid, p. 81).

Other verses are explained by referring to the social, psychological and historical realities prevalent in society at that time. For example, in order to provide the social background for verse 78, which relates what the leaders of the people were saying, Islahi refers to the power of the aristocracy of the period (aristokrasi bar sar iqtildar, ibid, p. 77) and to the atrocities they committed (israili bachon ko qatil kar dene ki jo sangdalana askim chali gayi thi, ibid). In addition, Islahi makes comments of a psychological nature to explain Pharaoh’s tactics in verse 79 (kisi haqiqat ko na manane ki khwaish ek aisi khwaish hai jis ki khatir insan bahot si hamaqaten kar guzarta hai, ibid, p. 78). Islahi is describing characteristics that belong to human beings in general in order to explain the behaviour of Pharaoh.

Another illustration of Islahi’s contextual approach is contained in his comments on the words of verse 83: “none save a few of his people declared their faith in Moses”. Islahi says the phrase refers to the experience of all the Prophets and actually describes the beginning of Islam itself (islam ki ibtadai tarikh bhi isi haqiqat ki shahadat deti hai aur dusre anbiya ki tarikh bhi, ibid, p. 79). After providing this historical background, Islahi goes on to give a more psychological explanation for verse 83 (is ki wazeh nafsiati wajh ye hai ke hazrat anbiya jis hamigir da’wat-i-islam ko le kar utate hai, ibid) and describes the fearlessness of young people in the face of the displeasure of those in authority (na waqt ke arbab-i-iqtidar ki barhami ko khatir mein late hain, ibid). Islahi is of the opinion that the verse itself indicates the disposition of those who enjoyed power in society in that period (is daur mein jo shakhs takht-i-hukumat par tha, wo bhi, jaisa ke ayat ke alfaaz se wazeh hai, ibid).

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82 For example, verses 40 and 42 both provide consolation for the Prophet (taskin o tasalli, ibid p. 59). Similarly, verses 98-100 are all meant to strengthen and console the Prophet in the face of his difficult situation (cf. ibid, p. 90-91).
The Way of God

Islahi is constantly making use of a concept he calls “the way of God” to explain verses in the Qur’an that describe God’s action in the world. For example, verse 11 says:

But We leave them alone (for a while) – all those who do not believe that they are destined to meet Us: (We leave them alone) in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. Islahi explains that it is according to “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi) that God does not punish unbelievers immediately (is sunnat ilahi ka taqaza ye hai, ibid, p. 31). The following verse is also clarified with reference to “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi ke taht, ibid). Similarly, Islahi says that verse 33 consoles the Prophet because unbelievers are people who oppose “the way of God” with them (ye sunnat ilahi ki zid mein aye hue log hain, ibid, p. 49). The Prophet is reminded that his responsibility is confined to presenting the arguments of the message in a clear way (itimam-i-hujjat ke ha’d tumhari zimmadari khatam ho jati hai, ibid).

At a time fixed by God, the Prophet is told to declare his imminent departure. Islahi describes this moment with the help of another concept he calls “the proclamation of the Prophet’s departure” (‘elan-i-barait). When people show persistent resistance to the message of the Prophet, God tells him to leave them to their own designs. As verse 41 says:

And (so, O Prophet,) if they give thee the lie, say: “To me (shall be accounted) my doings, and to you, your doings; you are not accountable for what I am doing, and I am not accountable for whatever you do”.

Islahi says this statement of the Prophet amounts to a declaration of his abandoning the people to their own fate. Once the Prophet has left them, the people have lost the basis of their security (jab wo in se ‘elan-i-barait kar deta hai to ye aman jo is ki badaulat gaum ko hasil hoti hai uth jati hai, ibid, p. 58). This moment is, therefore, crucial in the life of any nation. But Islahi’s analysis concerns the period of the Prophets.

Hence, the concept of “the way of God” points to the historical pattern according to which God punishes a nation only after their Prophet has been withdrawn from among them. The Meccans were spared such punishment because many of them believed in the message of the Prophet. Islahi says that verse 46 is an expression of “the way of God” as far as this applies to
them (\textit{ayat mein isi sunnat ilahi ki taraf isharah hai}, ibid, p. 60). Verse 47 puts it clearly:

> Now every community has had an apostle; and only after their apostle has appeared (and delivered his message) is judgment passed on them, in all equity; and never are they wronged.

Islahi says that, according to “the way of God”, this verse gives a warning to the Quraysh (\textit{ve quraysh ko anzar hai is sunnat ilahi ki roshni mein}, ibid) and expresses the basic historical pattern of the world according to which those who believe will experience prosperity and those who disbelieve will be defeated, which is essentially the theme (‘umud) of the Surah (\textit{jo log rasul par iman laye in ko najat o falah hasil hui aur jo log is ki takzib par are rah gaye in ki jar kat di gayi}, ibid).

The Prophet has come to provide them with complete and convincing arguments (\textit{itimam hujjat ke liye khuda ka rasul a chuka hai}, ibid). This is the special task of the messenger of God (\textit{ve sunnat ilahi rasulon ke sath makhsus hai}, ibid, p. 61). Until he has provided complete and convincing arguments, the mission of the apostle has not yet been accomplished (\textit{hujjat tamam . . . ke baghhair rasul ka mishan pura nahin hota}, ibid, p. 76). Islahi has the same explanation for verse 88 (cf. ibid, p. 82). He seems to understand the concept of “the way of God” as a law of history to which the modern world is also subject (\textit{is dunya ke andar zindagi ki jo muhlat qaumon ko milti hai wo apni salahiyaton ko ajagar karne ke liye milti hai}, ibid, p. 82). But people in the modern world do not have access to the same convincing arguments, which the people who lived at the time of the last Prophet had. Can “the way of God”, then, be a universal law of history for all nations?

The “sealing of hearts” refers to a process which is related to “the way of God (\textit{is sunnat ilahi ki taraf isharah hai}, ibid, p. 75) and which Islahi says is contained in the following phrase from verse 74:

> thus it is that We seal the hearts of such as (are wont to) transgress the bounds of what is right.

God appoints his apostles to preach with complete and convincing arguments but the people whose hearts are closed will not accept their message (\textit{aise logon par rasul ke zara’e se itimam hujjat hota hai aur is itimam hujjat ke natija mein in ke dilon par mahr lag jati hai}, ibid, p. 76). According to verse 44, these people are themselves to blame for the way they have closed themselves to the message of the Prophets:
Verily, God does not do the least wrong unto men, but it is men who wrong themselves.

Islahi repeats the verse in his own words without referring explicitly to the concept "the way of God (allah zara bhi apne bandon par zulm nahin karta balke log khud hi apni janon par zulm dhate hain, ibid, p. 59)." In conclusion, God’s action in punishing a group of people who reject the Prophet’s message can more correctly be understood as the inevitable consequence of a nation bringing destruction upon itself through its own evildoing.

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83 The same idea can be found in Surah Yumus, verses 12, 23 and 108.
Conclusions

Islahi places fifteen Surahs from the Meccan and the Median period in Surah Group Three and says that these Surahs all share a common theme (‘umud). Surah An Nur, however, is concerned with matrimonial relationships and other questions arising out of the changed social conditions prevailing in Medina. Besides, Surah Ibrahim, which was revealed ten years previously to Surah An Nur, has a different focus. Islahi can bring such diverse Surahs together into one Surah Group only by disregarding the multifarious historical conditions in which these diverse Surahs were revealed. It is misleading to say that they all share the same subject matter.

Islahi examines the situation in which the Surah was revealed (in ayat ke muzul ke daur mein, ibid, p. 66) and describes the atrocious conditions the Muslims had to endure (is ‘aburi daur mein, ibid, p. 81). Islahi claims that the verses themselves provide the details of the social background of the Surah (is daur mein jo shakhs takht-i-hukumat par tha, wo bhi, jaisa ke ayat ke alfaz se wazeh hai, ibid, p. 79). Islahi says that many verses were directed specifically to the Quraysh and even establishes a direct link between the parables of verses 22-23 and the Quraysh. Further, by highlighting several verses that express consolation and encouragement (tasalli) for the Prophet and his followers in these difficult conditions, Islahi wants to prove that his perception of the social and political background of the Surah is correct. One is left with the impression that Islahi is deliberately setting up an argument for his formulation of the theme (‘umud) of the Surah in terms of victory for the Muslims and the defeat of the Quraysh.

For Islahi, verse 2 is crucial for a correct understanding of this Surah. By means of this verse, Islahi discusses the question of the victory of the believers, which he posited as the main theme (‘umud) of the Surah. Islahi’s analysis does not satisfactorily answer the question as to how this victory can be experienced in this world as well as in the next. The language he uses regarding the success and prosperity promised to the believers remains ambiguous because it moves between a material, physical sense of success and prosperity and a spiritual or emotional sense of success and prosperity. Islahi gives the impression that the success and prosperity of this world are of the same kind as that which will be experienced in the next world. Moreover, Islahi presents the conflict between success and defeat in terms of
the struggle between truth and falsity, thereby moving beyond the victory of the Muslims in Mecca and raising the discussion to a more universal level.

Islahi rejects modern philosophy (jadid falsafion ke is nazariya, ibid, p. 35) according to which mankind began by holding divergent opinions about God and gradually developed to the monotheistic point of view. He proposes his own theory of history on the basis of verse 19, according to which mankind was originally "one single community". Such a perception of history accounts for the appearance of messengers from God who came to advocate the reformation of society. Islahi develops his theory of history with the use of several key concepts such as "the way of God" (sumnat-i-ilahi), the definitive presentation of the arguments for faith (itimam-i-hujjat) and the idea that a prophet must depart after completing his task (‘elan-i-barait). Islahi’s view of history is based on his own perception and interpretation of verse 19 (and other verses) and represents one account among other possible interpretations of history. Furthermore, Islahi does not sufficiently take note of the fact that his theory of history is totally dependent on a perception of faith. Other believers may have their own explanations of the development of history.
Surah Hud

Introduction

Islahi reminds the reader that a comprehensive overview of the theme ('umud) of Surah Group Three was provided in the introduction to the previous Surah. Since the present Surah is, according to Islahi's own principles of interpretation (hamare usul, vol. 4, p. 97), the second in a pair with the previous one (surah yunus hi ka musanna hai, ibid), the same kind of theme runs through this Surah as was evident in the previous one. The only significant difference between the two Surahs consists in the way the theme is expressed. In other words, the Surahs differ because of the approach that each Surah takes to the process of argumentation (ijmal o tafsil aur bahs o istadlal ke 'itibar se donon ka nahj alag alag hai, ibid). The narratives about former nations and peoples, which were presented in summary form in the previous Surah, are given much more detail in the present Surah. Islahi says that the very first verse of the Surah indicates this new focus:

A divine writ (is this), with messages that have been made clear in and by themselves, and have been distinctly spelled out as well – (bestowed upon you) out of the grace of One who is wise, all-aware.

Islahi adds that both the present Surah as well as the previous one have the same Qur'anic names (alif lam ra, ibid). According to Islahi, the fact that two Surahs have the same name argues in favor of their having the same meaning (suraton ke nam mein ishtarak in ke matalib ke ishtarak par dalil hai, ibid). Islahi considers these remarks about the theme ('umud) of the Surah to be sufficient (cf. ibid). He says that an overview of the meanings of the Surah (matalib ka tajaziyah, ibid) will highlight the cohesiveness of the Surah (puri surah bahaisiyat majmu’ nigah ke samne a jayegi, ibid).

The Coherence of the Surah

The coherence of the Surah becomes apparent as soon as the meaning of the whole Surah is grasped (mazamin surah ke is tajaziyah par ek sar sari nazan dalne se bhi andaza ho jayega ke puri surah ek ma’in maqasud par nhayat jami’ aur marbut khubab hai, ibid, p. 100. The coherence of the Surah consists of the way all the verses complement one another, thereby confirming the basic theme and purpose of the Surah. According to Islahi,
the theme (‘umud) of the present Surah is expressed most clearly in the phrase from verse 49:

for, behold, the future belongs to the God-conscious!

This phrase comes at the end of the historical narrative concerning the victory of Moses and the Israelites and explains why the last Prophet was sent to the Arab people (jis basharat o inzar ke sath tum apni qaum ke pas aye ho ba’ainhi isi inzar o basharat ke sath allah ne nih ko un ki qaum ke pas bheja tha, ibid, p. 99). While the Quraysh will experience the same fate if they do not desist in their opposition, the Prophet and his followers will have victory if they remain firm (anjamkar ki kamyabi khuda se darnewalon hi ko hasil hoti hai, ibid, p. 147).

In fact, whenever the present Surah refers to the narrative of Moses, Islahi draws our attention to this theme (‘umud) of struggle and ultimate victory or defeat. As verse 110 says:

And, indeed, (similar was the case when) We vouchsafed the divine writ unto Moses, and some of his people set their own views against it.

Islahi understands the verse in the context of the difficulties the last Prophet was having with his people. Hence, this verse encourage and consoles him (yahan ayat zere baks tasalli ke maqam mein hai, ibid, p. 174) and promises him the same victory as Moses experienced, provided he remain true to his mission (jis tara unhone sabr o istiqamat ke sath halat ka muqabla kiya yahan tak ke allah ne inko kamyabi bakhshi isi tarah . . . allah tumhen bhi tumhare mukhalifon par fatahmand karega, ibid). Islahi says that all the historical narratives are meant to bring consolation to the last Prophet. For example, in verse 66 we read:

And so, when Our judgment came to pass, by Our grace We saved Salih and those who shared his faith; and (We saved them, too,) from the ignominy of (Our rejection on) that Day (of Resurrection).

According to Islahi, the verse is saying that, just as God saved Salih and his companions, God will save the Prophet and his followers (jis tarah us ne salih ke dushmanon ko zalil o pamal kar ke rakh dia isi tarah tumhare dushmanon ko bhi ek din ruswa kar dega, ibid, p. 154). Islahi finds this message expressly stated in verses like 120:

And (remember:) out of all the accounts relating to the (earlier) apostles We convey unto thee (only) that wherewith We (aim to) make firm thy heart.
In short, by understanding many verses as bringing encouragement, consolation and eventual victory to the Prophet, Islahi finds cohesiveness in this Surah.

The Surahs differ only in the way they describe this recurring theme of coming victory. The previous Surah presented this theme (‘umud) in an abbreviated form whereas this Surah presents this theme in much more detail. The previous Surah presented the narrative about Moses in great detail while presenting the other historical narratives only briefly. In contrast, the present Surah makes passing reference to the narrative about Moses and highlights the narratives about the other Prophets. Hence, the two Surahs complement each other by forming a pair (is tarah ye donon suraten mil kar ek dusre ki takmil karti hai aur yahi haqiqat hai suraton ke zauj zauj hone ki, ibid, p. 164). The coherence of the Surah Group consists in the complementary way the Surahs are linked together.

Islahi offers another confirmation of the coherence of the Surah by trying to demonstrate that the text is based on reason. As we read in verse 24:

These two kinds of man may be likened to the blind and deaf and the seeing and hearing. Can these two be deemed alike in (their) nature?

Islahi says that believers are those who use their eyes and ears. For Islahi, this amounts to saying that the message of the Qur’an is based on reason (quran ki da’wat sar ta sar ‘aql o basirat par mubni hai, ibid, p. 120). In fact, the whole universe is a well-ordered, rational system. Islahi’s argument is that, since the Qur’an itself repeatedly draws our attention to the way everything in the universe is part of one coherent whole, it follows that the Qur’an itself must be a coherent account. An example can be found in verse 7:

And He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons; and (ever since He has willed to create life,) the throne of His almightiness has rested upon water.

The words and concepts Islahi uses to reflect on this verse are similar to those he uses for other verses in this Surah Group. He stresses that the world is not a place for childish pastimes (dunya koi bazicha atfal ya kisi kalindare ka khel tamasha nahi hai, ibid, p. 110). If the Creator had left

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84 Other references to the encouragement and consolation the Prophet received are scattered throughout the Surah (cf. ibid, p. 112 and p. 115, and p. 143).
85 Islahi uses similar words and concepts in his comment on verse 103 (ve dunya kisi kalindare ka khel nahi hai – balke ek ‘adl o hakim khuda ki banai hui dunya hai is wajh se zaur hai ke is ke ba’d ek aisa din aye jis mein is ka ‘adl kamil zahir ho, ibid, p. 171).
his creation to itself, his work would have been to no purpose (‘abas kam, ibid), which would have been totally against all logic or reason (kisi kar ‘abas ki nisbat bilkul khilaf ‘aql hai, ibid). Islahi concludes that the Creator has given human beings the freedom to choose the good (insan ko irade ki azadi aur khair o shar ka imtiyaz de kar, ibid) and will hold them to account on the Last Day (ek din apne rab ke age masul aur jawabdeh hoga, ibid). Islahi’s argument is that such a coherent description of the human predicament can only be expressed in a coherent way. Hence, the Qur’an, which presents this account of human life coherently, must be a coherent book.

The Natural Disposition of the Human Heart

In order to strengthen the argument for coherence illustrated by the rational order of the universe, Islahi develops his argument further by analyzing the difference between people who use their reason and those who fail to do this. One of his lengthy discussions on this topic is based on verse 17:

Can, then, (he who cares for no more than the life of this world be compared with) one who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Sustainer, conveyed through (this) testimony from Him, as was the revelation vouchsafed to Moses aforetime – (a divine writ ordained by Him) to be a guidance and grace (unto man)?

Islahi makes much of the distinction he finds in the verse between those whose natural disposition is blurred or contaminated (jin ki fitrat ka nur bujh chukka ho, ibid, p. 115) and those who have managed to keep themselves free of contamination (jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz ho, ibid). According to Islahi, only the latter find that the Qur’an confirms their inner convictions (jo kuch wo apne dil mein pa rahe hain is ki taid o tadsiq is asmani shahid ki zaban se bhi ho rahi hai, ibid). The light of inner conviction (nur-i-fitrat, ibid, p. 116) is the basis of their faith. It is clear that Islahi wants to draw a clear line between two groups of people, those whose lives are based on this inner light (nur-i-fitrat) and those whose convictions are dimmed because they have succumbed to the evil influences around them (jin ki fitrat kharaj ke bure asarat, ibid).  

86 Islahi returns to this topic of natural disposition in verse 31 where he says that those who accept din are those who have preserved their inner selves from contamination (din ki ni’amat hamesha inhi ko nasib hoti hai jin ke dilon mein is ke liye salahiyyat hoti hai aur jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz hoti hai, ibid, p. 139) and in verse 88, where he repeats the same points (apni fitrat maskh na kar li ho, ibid, p. 162)
Islahi continues his analysis by illustrating the existence of this enlightened
disposition (nur-i-fitrat) in the lives of the Prophets and referring to “the
light verse” from Surah An Nur (cf. ibid). Islahi’s appeal to the inner life of
persons to show how the Qur’an confirms the sound dispositions of the heart
is presented as another argument for the reasonableness of its message and
strengthens his claim that the Qur’an bears witness to an integrated universe
and that the Qur’an itself is, therefore, coherent. But how do ordinary
human beings in the world keep themselves free of contamination so as to
have a share in this light? Islahi says that ordinary people can share in this
light by obeying the Prophets (‘am logon mein se jo log anbiya ki da’wat
qabul karne mein sabaqat karte hain wo bhi ‘ala farq maratib is nur se
bahra mand hote hain, ibid, p. 116).

Islahi develops his notion of natural disposition (fitrat) even further in verse
28, where he says that the Prophet’s message would be clear to anyone
whose natural disposition is sound (agar tumhare andar bhi fitrat ki wo
roshni ma’jud hoti jo mere andar hai tab to meri ye da’wat tumhen khud
apne dil ki awaz ma’lum hoti, ibid, p. 138). According to the laws of nature
(qudrat ke qanun ke taht, ibid), it is possible to extinguish the voice of one’s
inner disposition, thereby rendering oneself incapable of receiving guidance
from God. In the last sentence of verse 28 we read:

Can we force it on you even though it be hateful to you?

This phrase confirms Islahi’s basic contention that revelation cannot be
superimposed from above without a sound basis in the natural order of the
human heart (cf. ibid).

Furthermore, Islahi finds an opportunity to stress the human capacity to
reach God in his comment on the following phrase from verse 56:

Verily, straight is my Sustainer’s way.

Islahi considers the phrase to be a confirmation of the capacity of human
reason and one’s natural disposition to take a person in the direction of God
(mere ‘aql aur mere fitrat ko is se bara-i-rast raht hai, ibid, p. 149). Set in
the context of the custom of idol worship (cf. ibid), Islahi says that this verse
is a rebuttal of those who strive to reach God through other means such as
idols. The way to God is through an upright heart (is tak pahunchne ke liye
ye kafi hai ke main sadiq dil se is ki taraf mutawajah ho jaun, ibid) and
Islahi is confident that God has bestowed such a capacity on every human
being (har fitrat-i-salim ke andar allah ta’ala ne wadiy’at farmaya hai, ibid,
p. 162).
The Social Context

An important key to finding the meaning of the Surah for Islahi is to investigate the social context in which it was revealed. One of the ways in which he does this is by identifying the social environment of the addressee of the verses. For instance, verse 5 says:

Oh, verily, they (who are bent on denying the truth of this divine writ) are enshrouding their hearts in order to hide from Him.

According to Islahi, this verse is addressed to the Quraysh and describes their response to the message of the Prophet (ab is ayat mein taswir hai is rawayyah ki jo peghambar ke inzar ke jawab mein mutakbarin quraysh ikhtiyar karte they, ibid, p. 108). Islahi says that the general reference to “man” (insan) in verse 9 is actually a reference to the Quraysh:

And thus it is: if We let man taste some of Our grace Islahi says that verse 5 has already described the attitude of these members of the Quraysh to the Prophet (yahan lafz insan agar che ‘am hai lekin is se murad hi log hain jin ka zikr upar se a raha hai, ibid, p. 111). Similarly, for Islahi, we can understand the questions in verse 17, which imply a negative attitude to Qur’anic revelation, because we know the verse is addressed to the Quraysh (is surah mein mukhatab chunke as Ian quraysh ha in is wajh se ye guman hota hai ke in ke liye kitab musa ki nazir kuch ziyadah mu’assir nahin ho sakti thi, ibid, p. 117). Furthermore, Islahi says that verses 18-19, which also describe the Quraysh, were revealed in the same context as verses 17-18 of the preceding Surah and, therefore, deal with the same topic (yahi mazmun ba’ina isi siyaq o sabaq ke sath . . . quraysh ko quran se sab se ziyadah char is ki da’wat tauhid se hai, ibid, p. 118). Identifying the Quraysh as the addresses has the effect of integrating the Surah.

A further reason for identifying the Quraysh as the addressee is provided by a characteristic style of the Qur’an through which verses addressed to the Prophet are actually meant for other people (khitab . . . aslan peghambar ke taraf nahin hota, ibid, p. 112). Islahi says that this style is most effective (ye uslub . . . ziyadah mu’assir sabit hota hai, ibid, p. 118) and is used again in verse 109 (is ka rukh mukhalifin ki taraf hota hai, ibid, p. 173). Taking note of this Qur’anic style, Islahi proceeds to describe the situation of those to whom verse 102 is actually directed, which is the situation of the Quraysh (quraysh ko sunai gayi hai, ibid, p. 170). Moreover, verse 111 is addressed to the Quraysh and to the Jews as well (lafz “kul” agarche ‘am hai lekin yahan is se murad . . . mushriqin quraysh aur yahud, ibid, p. 174). Interestingly, Islahi does not include the Muslims as those to whom this
verse may also be addressed. The reason may be that he reads these verses in the light of the theme (‘umud) according to which the Muslims are promised victory over the Quraysh.

**Lessons from History**

Another very significant concept with which Islahi unravels the meaning of the Surah is that of history. The historical narratives concerning the Prophets, which are told with some detail in this Surah, act as a mirror (aina), in which the Last Prophet and his people see themselves. According to Islahi, the purpose of these narratives is to bring out the similarity between the situations of the past with those of the present and the future (mazi ke aine mein in hazar aur mustaqbil ka pura naqsha a jaye. tarikh ki jo qadar o qimat hai wo isi pahlu se hai. agar ye pahlu nagahon ujal ho jaye to tarikh ki haisiyat mujarad das tan sarai ki rah jati hai, ibid, p. 137). So these narratives are not concerned simply with the past but with the present and the future (hazar aur mustaqbil). Islahi seems to be saying that the Surah is neither a work of historical analysis, nor does it indulge in story telling (dastan sarai) but presents a clear action-plan (naqsha) for its addressees living in the present (that is, at the time of revelation).

Based on this emphasis on the present and the future, Islahi makes a clear distinction between the two kinds of punishment (‘azab do qismon ka hola hai, ibid, p. 141) that he finds in verse 39:

But in time you will come to know who it is that (in this world) shall be visited by suffering which will cover him with ignominy, and upon whom long lasting-suffering shall alight (in the life to come).

Islahi says that the first kind of punishment is intended to shake people out of their negligence (jis ka maqsud ghafalin o munkarin ko jagana aur jhanjhorna hota hai, ibid) and to bring them some kind of awareness (in ko agah kar raha hai, ibid). The second kind of punishment is the destruction that comes only after the Prophet has completed his mission (kamil itimam hujjat ke ba’d, ibid).

Both kinds of punishment seem to have the same basic purpose, namely, as Islahi himself puts it, to provide a lesson for coming generations (ta ke one wali, naslen bhi in ke injam se sabaq hasil karen, ibid). For example, the punishment that the people of Lot received was of the final, decisive kind, yet the phrase in verse 89: “the people of Lot lived not very far from you”, seems to indicate that this historical narrative was meant to be a reminder to
those negligent people for whom there was still some hope of reform. In other words, it is a warning given in the form of a provocation (jagana aur jhanjhorna) in order to shake people out of their lethargy. It is not simply an account of the destruction that came after the final warning had been given (itimam hujjat ke ba’id). The problem seems to be that Islahi has limited his discussion to the Quraysh.

We find another example of the nature of punishment in the words of Shu’ayb to his people. As Islahi says, Shu’ayb told them that he was not bringing them news about the past but about their present condition (ye na samjho ke main tumhen sirf mazi ba’id ke afsane suna raha hun balke tumhare mazi qarib aur tumhare qarb o jauwar ki shahadal bhi yahi hai, ibid, p. 163). It seems clear that all the historical narratives in the Surah are addressed to people in their present surroundings and for their immediate benefit. All the punishment narratives, without distinction, share this same function.

We could find many illustrations of Islahi’s focus on the time of revelation. For example, Islahi proceeds to draw various lessons for the addressees of the Surah. He says that verse 59 is addressed to the Quraysh:

And that was (the end of the tribe of)’Ad.

The verse is meant to remind them that the evidence of history should be enough to inform them of what they can expect to happen if they do not change their ways (quraysh ko ye dikana hai ke . . . koi wajh nahin hai ke jis tarah ka ma’amla allah ta’ala ne in ke sath kiya isi tarah ka ma’amla wo tumhare sath na kare, ibid, pp. 120-121). Islahi says that the same message is contained in the phrase from verse 93:

Watch, then, (for what is coming:) behold, I shall watch with you.

Here the Prophet Shu’ayb is reflecting on the evidence of history and concludes that all the signs now indicate that his people are about to be punished by God (tum bhi mustahaq ‘azab hone ki sari ‘alamaten namudar ho chuki hain, ibid, p. 164). However, Islahi says that the general impression one gets from these historical narratives is that most people about whom these narratives were written did not heed the message of the Prophets (anbiya ki qaumon ka ma’amla bil ‘umum is ke bar’ks raha hai, ibid, p. 152). Islahi fails to show how this conclusion is not meant simply to add to our knowledge of history but is a message that is addressed by the Qur’an to people living in the world today.

So far, Islahi’s reflections have been limited to the time of revelation. But at this point he makes an unusual comment by extending the significance of the
historical narratives to the contemporary world. The people of Madyan as well as the Quraysh were offered the choice to reform or to perish. Islahi says that the same choice is presented to people today (is dunya mein insan ke liye wohi raste hain, ibid, p. 151). Islahi says there is a specific limit that people of all historical periods (koi qaum) may not cross (agar koi qaum apne hudud se guzar jati hai to ek khas had tak muhlat dene ke ba’id is ko drust bhi kar deta hai, ibid, p. 150). Basing himself on the historical narratives related in this Surah describing what happened to specific groups of people, Islahi presents a universal law of history.

Different Kinds of Language

In his introductory comments, Islahi observed that the theme (‘umud) of the Surahs in Surah Group Three do not differ markedly from one another but that the language and style used is different from one Surah to the next (nafs ‘umud mein donon ke darmiyan kuch aise farq nahin hai, albata ijmal o tafsil aur bahs o istadlal ke ‘itibar se donon ka nahj alag alag hai, ibid, p. 97). Islahi illustrates the importance of style in his discussion of the meaning of verse 87:

Said they: “O Shu‘ayb! Does thy (habit of) praying compel thee to demand of us that we give up all that our forefathers were wont to worship, or that we refrain from doing whatever we please with our possessions?

Islahi reminds the reader of the teasing style in which the people of Madyan said these words to their Prophet (ye pura fiqrah tanziyah andaz mein hai, ibid, p. 161).

Islahi also indicates the style of expression used in verses 71-72, in which Abraham’s wife expresses her joy and astonishment at the announcement that she would bear a child:

And his wife, standing (nearby), laughed (with happiness); whereupon We gave her the glad tiding of (the birth of) Isaac and, after Isaac, of (his son) Jacob.

Said she: “Oh, woe is me! Shall I bear a child, now that I am an old woman and this husband of mine is an old man? Verily, that would be a strange thing indeed!”

87 Islahi finds this message in verse 85, which is a warning to the people of Madyan to act justly. Islahi says that their corruption will be tolerated only for a set time fixed by God and, after that time is over, they will be destroyed (zamin ka khaliqu o malik bas ek khas had hi tak muhlat deta hai. is muhlat ke guzarte hi wo aise musfasadon se apni zamin ko pak kar deta hai, ibid, p. 161).
Islahi says that the style used here expresses various emotions (gonā gona jazbat ka mazhar thi. is ta‘jjub ka izhar unhone jin lafzon mein farmaya is ka havala age a raha hai, ibid, p. 155). Islahi explains that the words of Abraham’s wife, Sarah, are a feminine expression of amazement (wo khas niswaani andaz mein bolin . . . ye fiqrah izhar-i-ta‘jjub ka hai, ibid, p. 156) and the angels who bring the glad tidings are also aware that Sarah’s words are an expression of amazement (cf. ibid).

A further indication of Islahi’s sensitivity to the style or mood of a passage is his comment that Abraham was “naturally” (kudratan, ibid, p. 155) disturbed by the fact that his guests did not begin to enjoy the meal he had prepared for them. Islahi’s intuition leads him to conclude that Abraham was “naturally” upset. Moreover, Islahi stresses that the style of verse 104 expresses neither exaggeration nor divine knowledge but is simply the reporting of a fact (na koi mubalagha ka uslub bayan hai aur na ye bat ‘ilm ilahi ke ‘itibar se irshad hui balke ye ek haqiqat nafs alamri ka izhar hai, ibid, p. 172). Islahi finds confirmation for his view in the hadith (cf. ibid). This is an example of the way Islahi makes selective use of the hadith according to his own purposes.

Connected with different kinds of style is the different ways language is used. Islahi suggests that the phrase about the six days or aeons in verse 7 is an example of a figurative use of language:

And He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons and (ever since He has willed to create life,) the throne of His almightiness has rested upon water.

In other words, the reference to six days is not to be understood as we ordinarily understand it (che dinon se ye hamare din murad nahin hain balke khudai din murad hain, ibid, p. 109). Six days could refer to a thousand years or could simply refer to periods of time (ham in ko adwar se ta‘bir kar sakte hain, ibid). The language used here simply has a point to make (is haqiqat ko zahir karta hai, ibid).

Islahi proceeds to describe this reality in words that he uses elsewhere in his commentary. He says the gradual appearance of the world “in six periods” (ye dunya ka che adwar mein darja badarja zahur mein ana, ibid) gives expression to the deliberate and wise planning of the Creator (khaliq ne iradah, skim, tartib aur hikmat ke sath is ko wujud bakhsha hai, ibid). The point to note is that these words are meant to convey truth in a symbolic way. Islahi has a similar figurative approach to the other phrase mentioned
in the verse: “the throne of His almightiness”, saying that these words express the governance of God (khuda ki hukumat ki ta'bir hai, ibid).

On the other hand, Islahi does not progress very far beyond a literal translation of the text for several verses of the Surah. For instance, we read in verse 5:

Oh, verily, they (who are bent on denying the truth of this divine writ) are enshrouding their hearts in order to hide from Him.

By saying that the phrase “enshrouding their hearts” is similar in meaning to “hiding oneself under clothes” (is ko istighshah siyab se ta‘bir firmaya hai, ibid, p. 108), Islahi has given no more than a physical or material meaning to the phrase. Likewise, Islahi understands other verses, which would also seem to be using figurative language, in a similar prima facie, way. For example, verse 82:

And so, when Our judgment came to pass, We turned those (sinful towns) upside down, and rained down upon them stone-hard blows of chastisement pre-ordained, one upon another.

Islahi simply translates the phrase about the stones of sijjil (hijarah min sijjil), as “sang-i-gil stones that rained down” (sang-i-gil ke barish ki, ibid, p. 134), without investigating the possibility that the reference to these stones may be symbolic (cf. ibid, p. 159). It seems to me that such phrases in the Qur’an demand greater sensitivity to the use of literary style.

On the other hand, Islahi is also reluctant to allow that the historical narratives employ a figurative use of language. In verses 25-26, for instance, the Prophet Noah announces his message:

And indeed, (it was with the same message that) We sent forth Noah unto his people: “Behold, I come unto you with the plain warning that you may worship none but God – for, verily, I fear lest suffering befall you on a grievous Day!”

The core of this passage, for Islahi, is the fact that the Prophet Noah comes among his people as “a person with a clear warning” (nazirun mubin). Islahi insists that the message of the Prophet Noah is not given with the aid of comparisons or approximations. The Prophet’s message consists of the announcement of an actual occurrence (is ki nau’iyyat qiyasat aur andazon par mubni isharat o kinayat ki nahin hoti balke ek wazeh aur qat‘i khabar aur ‘elan ki hoti hai, ibid, p. 136). According to Islahi, the fact that the announcement is based on factual evidence must mean that the language used in this narrative is also of a direct reporting style (goya apni donon

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angkhon se is ko dekh raha hai, (ibid). Apparently, for Islahi, a figurative use of language would destroy the force of the warning contained in the historical narratives of the Prophets.

Furthermore, the words: “heavenly blessings” referred to in verse 52, apparently refer to earthly power and government in this world:

He will shower upon you heavenly blessings abundant, and will add strength to your strength.

Islahi states that “heavenly blessings” are words that express sustenance and prosperity (rizq o fazal mein ziyadati ki ta’bir hai, ibid, p. 148) and the phrase: “will add strength to your strength” refers to political power and might (siyasi qawwat o shaukat mein izafa ki taraf isharah hai, ibid). In fact, a nation that turns to God will be powerful in the four corners of the world (allah ta’ala is ke liye asman o zamin sab ki barkaton ke darwaze khol deta hai aur chahar dang ‘alam par is ki hukumat qaim ho jati hai, ibid).

Islahi understands these words of the Prophet Hud in a physical, material way whereas they could also be understood in a more figurative or spiritual way. Islahi goes on to say that these blessings are a result of a social or collective turning to God (ye ijtam’i tauba ki barkaten bayan hui hain, ibid), though he adds that an individual turning to God will also receive such blessings (cf. ibid). Islahi makes a final remark to the effect that turning towards God will bring peace and satisfaction (sakinat o tamaniyat ki lazawal badshahat bakhshta hai, ibid). However, Islahi does not succeed in removing the ambiguity over the nature of these blessings. Is this a reference to material power and prosperity or to something more internal or spiritual?

A similar ambiguity surrounds the “goodly sustenance” referred to in verse 88:

I am taking my stand on a clear evidence from my Sustainer, who has vouchsafed me goodly sustenance (as a gift) from Himself.

Islahi says the words “goodly sustenance” are linked to the words “grace from Himself” mentioned in verse 63, which is a reference to the divine revelation given directly to the Prophet (wahi ilahi ki ta’lim, ibid, p. 153). Here, the words denote the divine revelation (wahi ilahi ko “rizq husn” se ta’bir, ibid, p. 162) that Shu’ayb received from God. Islahi is quite clear that the words refer to spiritual and not material sustenance and even quotes the saying from Jesus that “man does not live from bread alone” (cf. ibid) to confirm his spiritual interpretation of these words. In contrast to his
emphasis on the spiritual nature of the “goodly sustenance”, however, Islahi says that the rest of the verse is an effort by the Prophet Shu‘ayb to convince his people that he is not trying to capture the market by preaching against their business practices (is tarah tumhen bazaar se be dakhal kar ke khud bazaar par qabiz ban bairun, ibid). So the context could suggest that Shu‘ayb had no need to capture the market because he was blest with abundant material sustenance. However, comparison with the usage of similar words in earlier verses of this Surah (verse 17, verse 28 and verse 63) persuades Islahi to hold fast to his spiritual interpretation of the “goodly sustenance” mentioned above.

Finally, since the style used in the Surah is indicative of its meaning, would it not be useful to investigate the style used in those verses that describe the horror of final punishment in hell? Verse 106 is a typical example of the vivid language used to describe such punishment:

Now as for those who (by their deeds) will have brought wretchedness upon themselves, (they shall live) in the fire, where they will have (nothing but) moans and sobs (to relieve their pain).

Islahi suggests that the language used here is a very clear expression of the suffering and disdain experienced in hell (ye dozakhkhiyon ke chikhne chalane aur rone khaghiyane ki ta‘bir hai aur in lafzon mein jo hiqarat ka pahlu hai wo bilkul wazah hai, ibid). However, since the reference to hell is a reference to things beyond the reach of human perception, it would have been better to mention that the suffering described in this verse (and in other similar verses) is of a different order than the suffering experienced in this world. Hence, the style used to describe it cannot be compared with the style used earlier to describe the joy and amazement of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. Instead of investigating the possibility that the style used in these verses about hell is an expression of the gravity or seriousness of the Day of Judgment, Islahi says the verse is simply a description of the actual, physical suffering that awaits the unbelievers. Islahi prefers to take these verses at their face value, in a prima facie way.

The Way of God

Another key to understanding the coherence of the Qur’an is the concept Islahi calls “the way of God” (sunnat-i-ilahi). Islahi finds a clear statement of this concept in verse 117:
For, never would thy Sustainer destroy a community for wrong (beliefs done) so long as its people behave righteously (towards one another).

Islahi explains that God would never destroy a community if, as a whole, the community is on the way to reform (sunnat ilahi . . . nahin hai ke wo kisi qaum ko in ke kisi zulm ki padash mein halak kar de jab ke is ke bashinde bahaisiyat-i-majmu'i islah karne wali hon, ibid, p. 177). Punishment comes only when there are no reformers left in the community or when their number is negligible (cf. ibid) and is based not on individual wrongdoing but on community depravity (‘azab ilahi isi waqt nazil hota hai jab majmu’a ka mizaj fasad ho jata hai, ibid). Hence, it is according to “the way of God” to deliver the Prophet Hud from the unbelievers and to punish them when the time has come (allah ta’ala ne apni sunnat ke mutahiq, ibid, p. 151).

The concept of “the way of God” can thus usefully be used to explain the way God sends his messengers successively to each nation, as related, for example, in verse 25:

And indeed, (it was with the same message that) We sent forth Noah unto his people.

Islahi comments that the Prophet Noah appeared as demanded by “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi ka taqaza hai, ibid, p. 136). Subsequent historical narratives are introduced in a similar way in the Surah, for example, verse 50:

And unto (the tribe of) ‘Ad (We sent) their brother Hud, and verse 84:

And unto (the people of) Madyan (We sent) their brother Shu’ayb.

Islahi says that each of these Prophets completed his mission to provide complete and convincing arguments (itimam hujjat, ibid, p. 160) for the people to whom they were sent, since it is according to “the way of God” to send each nation a Prophet who will communicate to them complete and convincing arguments about their responsibility to God (ye sunnat ilahi rahi hai ke har qaum ki taraf allah ta’ala ne inhi mein se rasul bheja ta’ke . . . hujjat tamam kare, ibid, p. 147). The concept sunnat ilahi is thus a key to understand verse 57:

But if you choose to turn away, then (know that) I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent unto you, and (that) my

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Islahi makes frequent use of the concept itimam hujjat or hujjat tamam and gives the same explanation for the concept in each different context within the Surah. Cf. ibid, pp. 107, 139, 141 and pp. 158-159. His constant use of this concept could strengthen his claim that the Qur’an is coherent.
Conclusions

Islahi begins by saying that this Surah is the second of a pair with the previous Surah (surah yunus hi ka musanna hai, ibid, p. 97) and that, therefore, both of these Surahs have the same theme. The only way the Surahs differ is in the way theme is presented. Such a remark can be made with respect to many other Surahs, all of which may have a similar theme but differ only in the style of presentation. To divide the Qur’an into preliminary and supplementary Surahs based on thematic coherence is an artificial division because all the Surahs of the Qur’an present the same basic message using different styles of expression.

Furthermore, Islahi does not present a convincing argument for the view that the preliminary letters, alif, lam, mim, represent the Qur’anic name of the Surah. If this were true, many Surahs in the Qur’an would share the same name.

Islahi stresses that the historical narratives related in this Surah are set against the background of the conflict between the Prophet and the Quraysh (isi siyaq o sabaq ke sath ... quraysh ko quran se sab se ziyadah char is ki da'wat tauhid se hai, ibid, p. 118). The Surah is coherent because all the verses complement one another to confirm the basic theme and purpose for which the Surah was revealed (puri surah ek ma'in maqsud par nihayat jam' aur marbut khutbah hai, ibid, p. 100). Islahi’s notion of the coherence of the Surah depends on his pre-conceived notion of its theme (‘umud).

Islahi says the Surah differs from the previous one only in the detailed way this Surah presents the argument (ijmal o tafsil aur bahs o istadlal ke ‘itibar se donon ka nahj alag alag hai, ibid, p. 97). One characteristic style of the Qur’an is the way in which verses addressed to the Prophet are actually meant for other people (ye uslub ... ziyadah mu'assir sabit hota hai, ibid, p. 118). These narratives are not concerned simply with the past but with the present and the future (hazar aur mustaqbil) and provide an action plan (naqsha) for its addressees living in the present. In fact, Islahi seems to present a universal law of history by referring to people of all historical periods (agar koi qaum apne hudud se guzar jati hai, ibid, p. 150). However, his emphasis on the reporting style used in the historical narratives of this Surah (goya apni donon angkhon se is ko dekh raha hai, ibid, p. 136) limits these narratives to a physical or material description of the events.
Islahi moves back and forth between a literal, *prima facie* reading and a more figurative, symbolic interpretation of the verses. Although Islahi says that the reference to the six periods in verse 7 must not be understood literally, it remains another expression of time. He feels it is a simple statement of fact and not hyperbole to say that Abraham was upset (*na koi mubalagha ka uslub bayan hai*, ibid, p. 172). Moreover, the “heavenly blessings” of verse 52 refer to political power and might in this world (*siyasi quwwat o shaukat mein izafa ki taraf isharah hai*, ibid, p. 148). Further, Islahi insists that “goodly sustenance” of verse 88 be given a spiritual interpretation. He uses the same kind of language to describe the suffering of hell mentioned in verse 106 as he uses to describe the amazement of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. His emphasis on the literal interpretation of the warnings contained in the historical narratives, however, make it impossible for him to articulate the universal message of the Surah.

The coherence of the Qur’an flows from the natural disposition of the human heart (*har fitrat-i-salim*, ibid, p. 162). Islahi uses the concept of human nature (*fitrat*) to divide humanity into two groups: those whose lives are based on an inner light (*nur-i-fitrat*, ibid, p. 116) and those who succumb to the evil influences of the world (*jin ki fitrat kharaj ke bure asarat*, ibid). Islahi’s theory of human nature over-simplifies the complexity of the human predicament in society and it is based on a selective reading of the Surah.

Islahi develops the concept he calls “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) because it provides a coherent synthesis of the historical narratives. However, it seems to me that the concept of “the way of God” would have been more complete if Islahi had included those verses that highlight other aspects of the way God deals with human beings in the world. For instance, note the last part of verses 106-107, in which Allah qualifies the punishment in store for unbelievers:

> Now as for those who (by their deeds) will have brought wretchedness upon themselves, (they shall live) in the fire, where they will have (nothing but) moans and sobs (to relieve their pain), therein to abide as long as the heavens and the earth endure – unless thy Sustainer wills it otherwise: for, verily, thy Sustainer is a sovereign doer of whatever He wills.  

Other verses like verse 90, which stresses God’s forgiveness and love, could have been included as well:

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90 I have emphasized some words of these verses with italics.
Hence, ask your Sustainer to forgive you your sins, and then turn towards Him in repentance – for, verily, my Sustainer is a dispenser of grace, a fount of love!

Islahi could have presented the concept of “the way of God” in a more balanced way by including the verses of the Qur’ān that emphasize how human beings bring suffering and punishment upon themselves. In short, Islahi has made a selective choice of verses with which to develop his concept of “the way of God”. He has not followed his own directive to include parallel verses (nazair) in his discussion of the meaning of this concept. Another reader of the Qur’ān would be able to understand “the way of God” from a different point of view by referring to different verses. Yet Islahi presents his version of “the way of God” as the only correct one.

91 For example, verse 101 states that human beings “wronged themselves” and verse 116 says that they “lost themselves in sinning”.

180
Surah Yusuf

Introduction

Once again, Islahi begins by referring to the overall theme (‘umud) of the Surah Group. At the start of his discussion of the present Surah, he recalls what he had already written in the introduction to Surah Group Three. According to Islahi, reflection on the Surahs of this Surah Group will result in the distinct impression that the main reality with which all these Surahs are concerned is to make clear, from various points of view and by means of different styles, that victory (kamyabi o fatahmandi, vol. 4, p. 183) in the struggle between truth and falsity, instigated by the Prophet, will go to the Prophet and to those who follow him and, conversely, a most humiliating defeat (zillat o hazimat, ibid) will be the lot of the Quraysh. In other words, the Surahs deliver a warning to the Quraysh and announce good tidings for the Prophet and his followers.

It should be clear to the Quraysh from the evidence of reason and nature, as well as from the evidence of living beings in the universe and from the witness of history and the laws of creation (‘aql o fitrat, afaq o anfus ke dalail aur tarikh o nazam kainat ke shawahid, ibid) that truth is on the side of the Prophet and his followers (haq tumhare pas a chuka hai, ibid) and that those who oppose him will very soon experience the evil consequences of their opposition. The Prophet and his followers are, in turn, encouraged to be patient and to hold fast to the truth because it will eventually lead them to success and prosperity (haq ko le kar turn ute ho anjamkar ki kamyabi o ferozmandi, ibid). Moreover, it is according to the way of God (sunnat ilahi) that the triumph of truth must be preceded by many trials and difficulties (haq ko ghalba aur kamyabi ki manzil tak pahunchne ke liye azmaish ke mukhtalif marhalon se guzarna parta hai, ibid). Hence, the believers will also have to experience similar trials. If they endure these trials with steadfastness they will taste success both in this world and in the next (dunya aur akhirat donon mein kamyabi tumhara hi hissah hai, ibid).

As verse 27 of Surah Ibrahim says:

God grants firmness unto those who have attained to faith through the word that is unshakably true in the life of this world as well as in the life to come; but the wrongdoers He lets go astray: for God does whatever He wills.
Islahi says that, in order to communicate this theme ('umud), the previous two Surahs provided detailed narratives about the lives of the Prophets and the peoples among whom they lived. Moreover, the purpose of relating all these narratives (sar guzashton ke sunane ka ye maqsud bayan farmaya gaya hai, ibid) is conveyed to the Prophet in verses 120-122 of the previous Surah, namely, Surah Hud:

And (remember:) out of all the accounts relating to the (earlier) apostles We convey unto thee (only) that wherewith We (aim to) make firm thy heart: for through these (accounts) comes the truth unto thee, as well as an admonition and a reminder unto all believers. And say unto those who will not believe: “Do anything that may be within your power, (while) we, behold, shall labour (in God’s way); and wait (for what is coming): behold, we too are waiting!”

Islahi says that Surah Yusuf has precisely the same purpose (ba’ainihi yahi maqsud, ibid, p. 184) as the narratives have that are contained in the previous two Surahs. The only difference is that the previous two Surahs contain several narratives about the Prophets whereas the whole of the present Surah is taken up by only one narrative. Islahi says the narrative in Surah Yusuf is an extremely fine one (behterin sar guzasht, ibid) and verse 90 contains a phrase that provides a summary of the whole Surah:

Verily, if one is conscious of Him and patient in adversity – behold, God does not fail to requite the doers of good!

According to Islahi, it seems that the purpose of Surah Yusuf is to confirm the message of Surah Hud by providing an historical example of what Surah Hud had said in verses 120-122 about the purpose of the historical narratives (goya surah hud ke ba’d surah yusuf isi haqiqat ko mubarhan karne ke liye ek tarikhi shadai hai, ibid). In other words, the historical example provided by the Prophet Joseph is meant to strengthen and confirm the last Prophet in his own mission.

The Theme of the Surah

In the opening verses of the Surah, Islahi finds confirmation of the theme ('umud) of the Surah Group. Verse 3 reads:

In the measure that We reveal this Qur’an unto thee, (O Prophet,) We explain it to thee in the best possible way, seeing that ere this thou wert indeed among those who are unaware (of what revelation is).

Islahi says that the narrative related in this Surah is a clear statement of the last Prophet’s own mission (ap ki risalat ki ek nihayat wazeh dalil hai, ibid,
Furthermore, Islahi says that the dream of Joseph is a sign of the blessings of the perfect religion (din) that was to be revealed later. As verse 6 says:

For, (as thou hast been shown in thy dream,) even thus will thy Sustainer elect thee, and will impart unto thee some understanding of the inner meaning of happenings, and will bestow the full measure of His blessings upon thee and upon the House of Jacob.

The story related in this Surah is not just a story but provides answers to the problems that the preaching of Islam was posing for many people (jo da’wat islami ke is daur mein, ibid, p. 195). Islahi says the previous two Surahs had already described the triumph of truth and the defeat of falsity in many different ways and styles (haq ke ghalba aur batil ki hazimat ka mazmun mukhtalif uslubon se bayan hua hai, ibid, p. 196). Since the whole nation was experiencing oppression at the time this message was being proclaimed (pure mulk par is tarah kufr ki tariki chai hui thiy, ibid), it was not easy to convey a message that spoke of the utter defeat of those who were now causing so much misery (ek din ayega ke ye tamam mutamarridin is ke age gutne tek kar is se raham o karam ki iltijayen karenge, ibid).

Furthermore, the Quraysh were invited to recognize their own future and that of the Prophet in the narrative related in this Surah (wo chahen to is sar guzashit mein apna mustaqli bhi dekh len aur is peghambar ka mustaqli bhi dekh len, ibid, p. 201). In the phrase from verse 52:

God does not bless with His guidance the artful schemes of those who betray their trust,

Islahi finds the theme (‘umud) expressed yet again, for the phrase states clearly that those who do wrong will not be successful whereas those who are faithful will achieve their purpose in life (wohi sar kharo aur hamurad hote hain, ibid, p. 225). Moreover, on the basis of verse 56, which states that God

p. 189) and that it is a mirror (ek aina) for the Prophet in which he could observe the ups and downs of life and see them in the perspective of the ultimate victory that is coming (is mein ap ko ap ke hazar aur mustaqli ka pura naqsha dekha dia gaya, ibid).
established Joseph securely in the land (of Egypt); he had full mastery over it, Islahi says that God will reward, even in this life, those who prove faithful in time of trial (is dunya mein bhi is ka sila deta hai, ibid, p. 238), but Islahi does not qualify the nature of this worldly success any further. Islahi makes the same comment on the phrase from verse 90, which has a very similar message:

Verily, if one is conscious of Him and patient in adversity – behold, God does not fail to requite the doers of good.

Islahi says that this verse is an explicit statement of the theme (‘umud) that has been developing since the outset (yahi haqiqat is sari sar guzasht ki ruh hai aur ham sharu’ mein ‘arz kar chuke hain ke is ko is surah ke ‘umud ki haisiyat bhi hasil hai, ibid, p. 250).

Islahi sees a final reference to the theme (‘umud) in verse 92, which says that Joseph was willing to forgive his brothers. Since the last Prophet used similar words to forgive the Quraysh in Mecca once he had conquered it (fatah makka ke din quraysh ke in sar ghanon ko khitab kar ke farmaye jo barabar ap ki dushmani mein sar garm rahe they, ibid, p. 251), this verse should be interpreted in terms of the future victory of Mecca.

The Social Context

Islahi describes the social context in such a way that it confirms the theme (‘umud) of the Surah. He frequently identifies the Quraysh as the addressees of verses. For example, Islahi says that the Quraysh are addressed in the very first two verses:

These are messages of a revelation clear in itself and clearly showing the truth: behold, We have bestowed it from on high as a discourse in the Arabic tongue, so that you might encompass it with your reason.

Though the verses are addressed to people in general, Islahi says that the specific addressees are the Quraysh (khitab ahl ‘arab se ‘umuman aur quraysh se khas taur par hai, ibid, p. 188). Similarly, though the next verse is addressed to the Prophet, it expresses a warning for the Quraysh as well (quraysh ki tanbih, ibid). Moreover, the phrase from verse 21:

For, God always prevails in whatever be His purpose: but most people know it not,

is another indication that this whole narrative is meant also for the Quraysh, who could, if they wished, see in it their own future (ye sari sar guzasht quraysh ko sunai ja ra hi aur ... wo chahen to is sar guzasht mein apna mustaqbil bhi dekh len, ibid, p. 201).
According to Islahi, the incident about the King’s drinking cup, which was placed in the camel-pack of Benjamin (verses 70-76), is another reminder to the Quraysh that they should not be misled by the present circumstances surrounding the Prophet. For only God knows what lies in the future and only God can bring a solution to a situation overcome by darkness (maujuda tarikion ke andar se kis tarah roshni baramad hogi aur islam aur peghambar islam ke liye kis tarah rahe hamwar hongi, ibid, p. 245). Islahi comments on the incident by giving ten specific observations based on the Islamic categories of haram and halal (cf. ibid, pp. 243-244). The reader gets the impression that Islahi is discussing the incident in the light of the triumph of the Prophet and of Islam over the Quraysh that took place subsequently.

In the last part of the Surah (verses 102-111), God wants to console the Prophet by reminding him not to be too concerned about the way people were rejecting his message (apne ap ko itna parishan kiyun rako, ibid, p. 257). These verses also represent a threat aimed at the Quraysh, who will suffer the same fate as their predecessors if they do not take note of the lessons contained in the historical narratives (agar unhone qaumon ki tarikh se sabaq na liya, ibid, p. 255). In this way, Islahi highlights the conflict between the Prophet and his opponents, thereby setting the stage for the final outcome.

**Natural Disposition**

In several places throughout the Surah, Islahi appeals to the use of reason. For example, Islahi considers verses 37-40, which contain the exhortation that Joseph made to his companions in prison, as an appeal to sound reason and to human nature. The argument is that there is no evidence for false deities by an appeal to reason (na hamari ‘aql mein, na hamari fitrat mein, ibid, p. 219). However, he seems to transcend the specific context by assuming that people use reason in the same way in all places and in all circumstances (yahi insan ki fitrat hai, ibid). Islahi makes the broad generalization that true religion is a religion of natural disposition (yahi sidha, mustaqim aur fitri din hai) and that other religions are not in accordance with human nature (is ke ‘alawah jitne bhi tariqe hain sab fitrat-i-insani se hote hue, ibid, p. 220). He does not support his assertion with evidence.
Islahi discusses how Joseph overcomes his temptation in terms of his natural capacity. As we read in verse 24:

And, indeed, she desired him, and he desired her; (and he would have succumbed) had he not seen (in this temptation) an evidence of his Sustainer’s truth: thus (We willed it to be) in order that We might avert from him all evil and all deeds of abomination – for, behold, he was truly one of Our servants.

Islahi says that every human being has been endowed with burhan (evidence of the truth) as a natural disposition (burhan-i-rab se murad wo nuryazdani hai jo allah ta’ala har insan ki fitrat ke andar wadi’at farmata hai, ibid, p. 206). It is according to “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi, ibid) that He guides and strengthens only those who appreciate this natural disposition and that He seals the hearts of those who give it no importance (akhlaqi ‘itibar se bikul hi andha bahra bana kar chaar deti hai, ibid). Joseph was able to overcome this most serious temptation because he drew strength from his natural disposition (apne nur-i-fitrat ki nigrani karte ham, ibid, p. 207).

Islahi explains this verse by using psychological concepts to move beyond the social and political context.

**Different Kinds of Language**

The first point to note is that, at least with regard to the first three Surahs of this Surah Group, Islahi distinguishes between the matter or subject of the Surah and the style or way it is expressed (in mein asl mauzu’ bahs ek hi hai albata andaz-i-bahs aur mauad-i-istadlal har ek mein alag alag hai, ibid, p. 188). The point to note is the influence this distinction may have on the meaning he draws from the text. For the difference in style from one Surah to the next is likely to have an impact on its meaning. Yet Islahi simply disregards this possibility and claims that the topic or subject matter for all the Surahs remains one and the same even though the style they use is very different.

A second point is the assertion that no external sign is needed to confirm the truth of this revelation (is kitab ki sadaqat ki gowahi ke liye kisi kharaji mu’ajaze ya nishani ki zarurat nahin hai, ibid) since its truth is as self

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92 Islahi mentions the concept “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi) in several other places as well. In this context, he uses the concept to stress that God guides those who, like Joseph, use their freedom to do good and to overcome temptations (cf. ibid, pp. 225-226). In the context of verse 111, Islahi says that “the way of God” is to punish nations only after the Prophet has completed his mission (rasulon ke zara’ e se logon par apni hujjat puri karta hai, ibid, p. 259). This concept is given more prominence in other Surahs.
evident as the sun (suraj ki tarah roshan dalail khud is ke andar hi maujudd hain, ibid) provided people approach it with an open heart. In contrast with this assertion, however, Islahi constantly resorts to the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims to confirm the theme ('umud) of this Surah Group. Yet this is a specific event that occurred in history. Islahi finds both explicit and implicit references to this event throughout the Surahs of this Surah Group. As a result, Islahi may have unwittingly provided an historical event as a substitute for the miracles and signs that the opponents of the Prophet were demanding.

Islahi alludes to the metaphorical character of the truths contained in Joseph’s dream and to the appropriate mental capacity needed to understand them (ranya mein haqaiq majaz ki shakal mein zahir hote hain jin ko samajhna ek khas zahini munasabat ka muqtadi hai, ibid, p. 192). Presumably, he would not say the same thing about the Prophet’s experience of revelation, though the Qur’an also presents many truths in figurative language and the same care that Islahi takes to understand Joseph’s dream is needed to understand the language of the Qur’an. Islahi himself says that the narrative about Joseph in this Surah is like a “mirror” (aina, ibid, p. 189), implying that it must be understood not as a presentation of fact but as a symbolic narrative that conveys a message or a lesson (sabaq amuz . . . sar guzasht, ibid).

It is also the case that Islahi does not always acknowledge the figurative meaning of a phrase. For instance, the irony in the attitude of Joseph’s brothers when they plot to banish their brother and thereby to live as “righteous people” (verse 9) is missed altogether by Islahi. According to Islahi, the word saleh (righteous) should be taken in its literal meaning (lafz ‘saleh’ yahan thik apne laghwi mafhum mein hai, ibid, p. 196). Hence, their plot to banish Joseph will actually bring them relief from the burden their brother has been to them (ye wo ‘alaj hai jo hazrat yusuf ke bayon ne apni parishani dur karne ke liye socha, ibid). But the irony that these brothers would, indeed, become “righteous people” by undergoing many trials leading to their subsequent conversion of heart is lost in Islahi’s literalism.

Islahi’s failure to appreciate irony is illustrated further when he discusses verse 93:

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93 According to Islahi, the same point is made in the first verse of Surah Al Furqan, which is the first Surah of Surah Group Four (cf. vol. 5, p. 443).
(And now) go and take this tunic of mine and lay it over my father’s face, and he will recover his sight.

Instead of accepting this gesture as an example of Arabic custom,94 Islahi says this was an emotional gesture on Joseph’s part and that we cannot understand what was going on in his feelings (in chizon ka ta’alluq jazbat se hai, ibid, p. 251). Islahi says it is impossible to explain these things rationally (‘aql in ki taujih se bilkul qasir rah jati hai, ibid, p. 252). But it is precisely Islahi’s focus on a narrow concept of reason and rationality that prevents him from approaching these events and gestures from a different point of view. It is significant that the very last verse of the Surah refers to the “insight” needed to understand the stories of the Prophets:

Indeed, in the stories of these men, there is a lesson for those who are endowed with insight.

As one would expect, Islahi refers to these people of “insight” as “the people of reason” (ahl ‘aql, ibid, p. 260), who act or think according to “reason” (‘aql se kam len, ibid). But the style of the Surah, which Islahi had identified as the distinguishing mark of each Surah of this Surah Group, cannot simply be identified with the particular notion of rationality that Islahi has adopted. The style of the Surah is an expression of the social and literary customs of the period in which it was revealed and cannot be reduced to certain assumptions about “reason” and “rationality” prevalent in a subsequent age.

94 Islahi has many references to Arabic custom in his discussion of this Surah. He refers to the common practices of the Quraysh (is daur mein bordah quraysh ka rawaj ‘am tha, ibid, p. 200) and the “cushioned couch” referred to in verse 31 is explained in terms of the local customs (misr ki waqt ki tazhib ke mutahiq, ibid, p. 208). He also explains slavery in terms of the customs of that period (is zamane mein malikon ko apne ghulamon par jo ghair mahdud ikhtiyarat hasil they, ibid, p. 217) and describes the jails according to the situation of the period (is zamane ke jail, ibid, p. 218). The prostration of Joseph’s family is also explained in terms of the influence of the environment (mahol se nasta assir ho kar, ibid, p. 254). Despite Islahi’s frequent reference to Arabic customs and traditions, however, he does accept their significance in interpreting the Qur’an.
Conclusions

Islahi says that Surah Yusuf is another example of the general theme of Surah Group Three about the struggle between truth and falsity and the success and victory of the Muslims (kamyabi o fatahmandi, ibid, p. 183). He totally neglects the envy, jealousy and rivalry that form such an important part of this Surah. Besides, Surah Yusuf also deals with the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation. Islahi overlooks these aspects of the Surah because they do not fit easily into his pre-conceived notion of the theme ('umud).

Further, Islahi gives the Prophet Joseph’s dream a religious meaning. He does not avert to the fact that the interpretation of dreams is a distinct branch of psychology. Perhaps this is another example of Islahi’s failure to draw on the findings of modern social sciences in the interpretation of the Qur’an.

Islahi provides no evidence for his claim that many verses of this Surah were addressed to the Quraysh. Islahi does not simply say that some members of the Quraysh happened to be the first addressees of the Surah but that much of this Surah was actually addressed to the Quraysh (ye sari sar guzasht quraysh ko sunai ja rahi hai, ibid, p. 201). Islahi thereby fails to bring out the symbolic meaning of the story of Joseph and loses much of its universal significance.

Reading this Surah in the light of the theme he has already articulated (is surah ke ‘umud, ibid, p. 250), Islahi concludes that the Surah describes the situation of darkness (maujuda tarikion, ibid, p. 245) in which the Prophet and his followers were living and the eventual victory of the Muslims in Mecca (fatah makka, ibid, p. 251). The ten categories of haram and halal presented by Islahi (cf. ibid, pp. 243-244) also reflect the subsequent victory in Mecca. The narrative of the Prophet Joseph is thus a mirror (ek aina) in which to understand the life and the times of the last Prophet (peace be upon him) who had to confront his own opponents, the Quraysh. By neglecting the occasions of revelation (shan-i-nuzul, vol. 1, p. 31), Islahi has failed to set the story narrated in this Surah against the wider background of the social questions and problems of the people. As a result, Islahi has been able to project his own version of the theme of the Surah onto the narrative.
Islahi finds evidence for his version of the theme of the Surah by presuming that people use reason in the same way in all place and circumstances ('aql or fitrat, afaq o anfus ke dalail, ibid, p. 183). He also claims that religion is based on nature (fitri din, ibid, p. 220) and on natural disposition (nur-i-fitrat, ibid, p. 207) linking all these assertions with his concept of “the way of God” (sunnat-i-ilahi). Islahi uses words like “human nature”, “reason” and “natural disposition” inter-changeably, assuming that their meaning is clear and claiming that they all explain his own particular notion of “the way of God”.

Islahi asserts that no external sign is needed to confirm the truth of the Qur’an (is kitab ki sadaqat ki gawahi ke liye kisi kharaji mu’ajaze ya nishani ki zarurat nahin hai, ibid, p. 188). However, by frequently highlighting the conquest of Mecca to confirm the theme (‘umud) of the Surah, Islahi may have unwittingly provided a major historical event as a substitute for the external signs that the opponents of the Qur’an were demanding.

Finally, a note about Islahi’s remark that the way the narrative of Joseph is presented in this Surah is more “natural” than the way it is presented in the Bible (quran ka bayan bilkul natural hai aur taurat ka bayan bilkul khilaf-i-‘aql o fitrat aur shan-i-nubuat ke munafi, ibid, p. 190). Such a statement is a further indication that Islahi approaches the text with certain rational assumptions about what is “natural” and what is “reasonable”. Moreover, despite his frequent assertion that the main difference between Surahs consists in their different styles of presentation (uslub-i-bayan aur najh-i-istadlal), Islahi totally disregards the characteristic style of presentation used in the Biblical narrative. Islahi has not investigated the different styles of expression used in the former Scriptures (qadim asmani sahife, vol. 1, p. 33). This is an indication that he does not take the former Scriptures very seriously – despite his remark to the contrary in the Preface to his commentary.
Surah Ar R’ad

Introduction

This Surah is the twin of the previous one, Surah Yusuf. Islahi finds no substantial difference in theme (‘umud) between the two Surahs. The Surah seeks to highlight the fact that one group is ultimately successful in the struggle between truth and falsity that was instigated by the revelation of the Qur’an (anjamkar ki kamyabi is mein jis groh ko hasil hone wali thi y is ko is mein numayan farmaya hai, vol. 4, p. 263). The previous Surah also sought to clarify this reality (haqiqat, ibid) and each Surah has its own way of presenting it (donon suraton mein tariq-i-istadil alag alag hai, ibid). Whereas Surah Yusuf expresses this reality through the life and experiences of the prophet Joseph (zindagi ke halat o waqe ‘at, ibid), the present Surah depends on arguments drawn from reason and nature (‘aql o fitrat ke dalail, ibid). Islahi says that the theme (‘umud) of the Surah finds expression most clearly in verses 17-22, which end with the sentence:

It is these that shall find their fulfillment in the hereafter,
From this final sentence, however, it appears that the believers will obtain victory, prosperity and success in the next life, a promise apparently at variance with the theme of victory in this world that Islahi understands as the theme (‘umud) of the Surah.

The Theme of the Surah

One of the main ways that Islahi arrives at his conclusion about the coherence of the present Surah is by proposing a general theme (‘umud) for the whole Group and finding confirmation of this theme in several verses of the present Surah. Islahi expresses the general theme (‘umud) of Group Three as follows:

A profound reflection on the Surahs of this Group will bring one to the evident conclusion that the truth common to all these Surahs, though expressed by them in different ways and from different angles, is the fact that the message of the Prophet is one of a struggle between truth and falsity. It is also quite clear from these Surahs that this struggle will result in a victory for the Prophet and for those who put
their faith in him and that, ultimately, the Quraysh will be subdued and humiliated.\textsuperscript{95}

Islahi proceeds to find verses that support this theme (‘umud) by describing the nature of the victory hoped for by the Muslims and the expected defeat of their opponents. One of the key verses is verse 41:

Have, then, they (who deny the truth) never yet seen how We visit the earth (with Our punishment), gradually depriving it of all that is best thereon?

Islahi understands the reference to “the earth” in this verse as a reference to the region around Mecca (\textit{al ard se murad yahan sar zamin makka hai}, ibid, p. 300). Islahi says that those looking for a sign to confirm the truth of the Prophet’s message have only to look at what is happening around them. They will have to admit that, from all sides, Islam is slowly advancing on Mecca and they will have to conclude that Islam will soon be triumphant in the whole region (\textit{islam ki da’wat biltadrij makka ke atraf ko fatah karti hui sar zamin makka ki taraf barh rahai hai}, ibid, p. 300).

Islahi proceeds to give a short history of early Islam. He says that, despite the opposition of the Quraysh, more and more people gradually embraced Islam (\textit{ahista ahista atraf ke qabail ke bahot se log islam mein dakhil ho gaye}, ibid). Eventually, the migration to Medina took place (\textit{bilakhir isi shahr ko allah ta’ala ne dar alhijrat hone ka sharaf ‘ata farmaya}, ibid). In short, even though Islam remained oppressed in its own hometown, everywhere else Islam was becoming popular (\textit{islam khud apne ghar mein to is daur mein mazlum raha lekin bahar is ko farogh hasil ho raha tha}, ibid). So it seems that, with regard to verse 41, Islahi has simply followed the interpretation of many commentators who say that the verse refers to the struggle between the early Muslim community and the pagans in Mecca.\textsuperscript{96}

However, by placing the verse in the context of the early history of Islam, Islahi can refer to it as a clear statement of the theme (‘umud) of the Surah.

Islahi says that this particular understanding of verse 41 is confirmed in verse 44 of Surah \textit{Al Anbiya}, which uses very similar words:

\textit{Nay, We have allowed these (sinners) – as (We allowed) their forebears – to enjoy the good things of life for a great length of time: but then – have they never yet seen how We visit the earth (with Our

\textsuperscript{95} Cf. Ibid, p.10. This statement of the overall theme of Surah Group Three has been taken from the general introduction at the beginning of Islahi’s commentary on Surah Group Three.

\textsuperscript{96} Muhammad Asad says that the view of these commentators would imply that the verse is “a prophecy of the gradual conquest of all Arabia by the Muslims”. Asad (1980), p. 369, footnote 80.
punishment), gradually depriving it of all that is best thereon? Can they, then, (hope to) be the winners?

Islahi ends his discussion by providing more information about the history of early Islam, saying that the opponents of the Muslims were beginning to lose respect (cf. ibid, p. 301). For Islahi, the theme ('umud) of the present Surah has been firmly established in verse 41 and references to the theme in earlier verses of the Surah simply serve to confirm it.\(^{97}\)

The Social Context

Another way in which Islahi establishes the coherence of the Surah is by describing how the social context provides a background for the realization of the theme ('umud). Since the Muslims were experiencing much opposition on the part of the Quraysh, Islahi finds many verses encouraging and consoling the Prophet. The very first verse can be understood in this light:

> These are messages of revelation: and what has been bestowed upon thee from on high by thy Sustainer is the truth – yet most people will not believe (in it).

Islahi explains the verse as an expression of consolation (tasalli, ibid, p. 271) for the Prophet, who was facing much opposition. Similarly, verse 19:

> Can, then, he who knows that whatever has been bestowed from on high upon thee by thy Sustainer is the truth be deemed equal to one who is blind? Only they who are endowed with insight keep this in mind.

Seen from one aspect, this verse consoles the Prophet (tasalli ka pahlī, ibid, p. 284) and from another aspect, the verse is a warning for the unbelievers (ibid). Moreover, verse 31 contains some words of consolation for upright Muslims (nek dil musalmanon ko tasalli di gayi hai, ibid, p. 291). Islahi finds several other verses that express consolation for the Prophet in the difficult social conditions that he and his followers had to face.

Although verse 37 is addressed to the Prophet, Islahi says that there are some words in it directed to all the unbelievers (is ka rukh tamam mushriqin ki taraf hai, ibid, p. 297):

\(^{97}\) In the group of verses 17-26, Islahi finds references to the eventual victory of truth and the defeat of falsity (bitakhir haq ki fatah par muntahi hoga aur batil ftag ki manand ur jayega, ibid, p. 280). Verse 17 alludes to the defeat of falsity and the permanence of the Qur'an (ye sare ftag faad ho jayenge aur quran aur is ke hamalim baqi rah jayenge, ibid, p. 283) and, in another place, Islahi states that the victory will come soon ('angarib in par wazeh ho jayega ke anjamkar ki kamyabi kis ko hasil hoti hai, ibid, p. 297).
And, indeed, if thou shouldst defer to men's likes and dislikes after all the (divine) knowledge that has come unto thee, thou wouldst have none to protect thee from God, and none to shield thee (from Him).

Islahi says that verse 36 describes the People of the Book (ahl kitab murad hai, ibid, p. 296) and describes their disposition towards the revelation of the Qur'an (cf. ibid). Basing his views on the following sentence from the same verse:

But among the followers of other creeds there are such as deny the validity of some of it,

Islahi outlines the different attitudes of the Arabs and the Christians (nisara aur mushriqin 'arab, ibid), saying that the verse is a response to their difficulties and to their objections to the message of unity (tauhid, ibid).

Islahi exposes the political motivations of those referred to in the following sentence from verse 33:

Nay, goodly seems their false imagery to those who are bent on denying the truth, and so they are turned away from the (right) path:

and he whom God lets go astray can never find any guide.

Islahi says that this sentence refers to those people who were ready to defend the worship of their deities (shirk ki himayat mein, ibid, p. 295). But it was only a ploy by which they tried to protect their power and status (ye mahz apne iqtidar aur apni peshwai ko bachai rakhne ki ek chal hai, ibid). The Prophet's message had deprived their religious practices of any real significance but they could not step down from their inherited positions of honour (peshwai ki maurusi gaddi chaury nahin jati, ibid). Islahi's perceptions into the psychological reasons for their behaviour provide new insights into the meaning of this verse. He exposes the psychological blocks that can prevent people from receiving guidance from God (kis ki taqat hai ke in ko hidayat ki rah par la sake, ibid).

Islahi explains several other verses by saying they represent answers to questions and objections made by the opponents of the Prophet. For example, some people were asking him about the resurrection of the dead (verse 5). Others were asking for a miraculous sign from on high (verse 7 and verse 27). Still others were demanding proof that the punishment would be real (verse 6). Islahi says that verses 12-13 are a response to the demand about punishment (ab ye isi mutalba 'azab ke jawab hain, ibid, p. 276). Moreover, Islahi says that two further answers are contained in verse 38:
And, truly, We sent forth apostles before thee, and We appointed for them wives and offspring; and it was not given to any apostle to produce a miracle save at God's behest.

Islahi says that this verse provides a clear answer to two main objections of the unbelievers. The answers consist in the fact that firstly, the messengers were not angels but human beings and that, secondly, the messengers could work a miracle only with the permission of God (cf. ibid, p. 299).

A final point that requires our attention is the way Islahi discusses the "natural bond" that all men and women have with God (‘ahd allah). There is a reference to this "natural bond" in verse 20:

They who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant.

Islahi says the covenant refers to the natural covenant (misqat fitrat, ibid, p. 285) that all human beings have made with God through Adam (misqat se muraq yahan misaq fitrat hai jo tamam aulad se kiya gayo hai, ibid). A further reference to the "bond with God" is to be found in verse 25:

As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established (in their nature).

Islahi says that here the verse refers to the natural bond with God (‘ahd fitrat, ibid, p. 287). However, when the same phrase appears in verse 91 of Surah An Nahl:

And be true to your bond with God whenever you bind yourselves by a pledge,

Islahi says it refers to the covenant that the Jews made with God (yahud ko mukhatab kar liya hai... in ki taraf rukh karti farmaya ke allah se jo ‘ahd tum ne bandha hai is ko pura karo, ibid, p. 441). Although the wording of this verse from Surah An Nahl does not differ from the two verses in Surah Ar R'ad, Islahi views this verse in the light of the preceding verses (qarina) that refer to the Jews.

Different Kinds of Language

For Islahi, the language of the Surah provides further indication of the overall theme and connectedness of the Surah. For instance, Islahi notes the teasing style in verse 33:

Do you (really think that you could) inform Him of anything on earth that He does not know – or (do you) but play with words?

He says that God uses this style to expose the unbelievers’ wrong conception of God (mushriqin se bandaz tanz sawal farmaya hai, ibid, p. 295). Other
messages are conveyed through the parables, which Islahi says are meant to invite people to reflect. For example, the parables in verse 17 point to what will happen to those who are on the side of falsity and to what is in store for the believers (tamsilen is liye pesh kar raha hai in ke andar wo log bhi apna mustaqbil dekh len jo batil ki hamayat mein astinin charhaye hue hain aur ahl iman bhi apna roshan mustaqbil dekh len, ibid, p. 283). Since Islahi’s approach is to apply the parables to specific groups of people, he says the parables in verse 17 concern unbelievers as well as those who believe. This approach is consistent with the approach he takes for verse 92 of Surah An Nahl and for verses 175-176 of Surah Al A’raf where he applies the parable explicitly to the Jews (cf. ibid, p. 443).

Islahi says that certain words from verse 16 are used in a figurative way:

Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? – or can the depths of darkness and the light be deemed equal?

Islahi says that the words ‘ama (blind) and basir (seeing) in this phrase stand for rational and ethical blindness and vision (‘aqli o akhlaqi andhon aur binaon ke mafhum mein ist’emal hue hain, ibid, p. 279). Similarly, zulumat (darkness) stands for rational and ethical darkness (‘aqli aur akhlaqi tarikiyan, ibid) and nur (light) stands for the light of reason or the light that comes from faith (‘aqli o imani roshni, ibid). Islahi has a similar figurative way of understanding verse 19:

Can, then, he who knows that whatever has been bestowed from on high upon thee by thy Sustainer is the truth be deemed equal to one who is blind?

Islahi says the verse describes intellectual and spiritual blindness (‘aql o dil ke andhon ke liye warid hua hai, ibid, p. 284). In other words, Islahi is willing to accept that these verses make use of language in a figurative or metaphorical way.

On the other hand, Islahi implies that the illustration (misal) in verse 35 is an accurate description of paradise. He does not make any further investigation into the figurative meaning of this image (wo aise sada bahar boghon mein utare jayenge jin ki paidawar bhi daimi aur jin ka saya bhi daimi, ibid, p. 295). Islahi has a literal approach to this verse.
The Way of God

Islahi continues to develop the overall theme of the Surah by using the concept “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi). As verse 7 says:

Thou art only a warner; and (in God) all people have a guide. God sends a messenger to warn the people before bringing punishment down on those who stubbornly refuse his message (ye is sunnat ilahi ki taraf isharah hai ke allah ta’ala kisi qaum ko saza dene se pahle is ko inzar o tanbih farmata hai, ibid, p. 274). Similarly, Islahi says that the phrase in verse 8:

for with Him everything is (created) in accordance with its scope and purpose,
is another example of “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi) that cannot be altered by human impatience (logo ki jald hazi se wo sunnat ilahi mutaghayyar nahin hoti, ibid).

Moreover, Islahi finds the theme of the Surah expressed in verse 11:

Verily, God does not change men’s condition unless they change their inner selves; and when God wills people to suffer evil (in consequence of their own evil deeds), there is none who could avert it: for they have none who could protect them from Him. Islahi explains that, according to “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi) God brings punishment to a nation only if the people refuse to accept the warning given to them (ye qaumon ke ‘azab ke ma’amle mein sunnat ilahi ki wazahat farma di, ibid, p. 275). Islahi says that, in this verse, “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi) urges a person to take stock of his life (is sunnat ilahi ki roshni mein apne halat ka jaizah lo, ibid). If a nation evaluates and changes its behaviour, God will swiftly change the way God deals with this nation (khuda ka tumhare sath jo ma’amla ab tak raha hai ab is ke badalne mein bhi der nahn hai, ibid). But once God decides to punish a nation, no one can prevent this from happening, least of all the nation’s deities (cf. ibid). In other words, Islahi places this verse in the context of the warnings regarding the fate of a nation that are part his concept of “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi).

According to Islahi, verse 16 says that it is against reason to suggest that truth and falsity are the same (‘aql o insaf ke khilaf hai, ibid, p. 283). Islahi broadens the concept of “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi) by saying that, according to verse 17, it is also against human nature and against the way God maintains the universe (sunnat ilahi) to suggest that truth and falsity are
the same \((fitrat ke bhi khilaf hai aur is sunnat ilahi ke bhi jo is kainat mein jari o nafliz hat, ibid)\). Islahi says that the parables contained in this verse carry the same message, affirming that the clash between truth and falsity will result in the complete victory of the truth (cf. ibid). It seems that Islahi is using the concept of “the way of God” \((sunnat ilahi)\) to provide further confirmation of the theme \(\text{‘umud}\) of the Surah about the triumph of the truth. Moreover, for Islahi, the triumph of the truth is given a specific, visible expression in the triumph of Islam in Mecca, as we saw in the section above on the theme of the Surah.

Verse 34 is a further example of the concept of “the way of God” \((sunnat ilahi)\):

For such, there is suffering in the life of this world; but, truly, (their) suffering in the life to come will be harder still, and they will have none to shield them from God.

Islahi says the verse refers to the punishment \(\text{‘azab}\) that God inflicts on a nation after the messenger of God has accomplished his mission to present the people with complete and convincing arguments \((is sunnat ilahi ko yad rakhe . . . ke jis qaum par rasul ke zara’ se hujjat tamam kar di jati hai agar wo iman nahin lati to lazman wo halak kar di jati hai, ibid, p. 295)\). It seems that Islahi is focusing here on the final destruction of the unbelievers rather than on the suffering they experience in the present world.\(^98\) But it seems that this reference to final destruction is also taken as an illustration of the triumph of truth over falsity and of the victory of the Muslims over the Quraysh.

Islahi finds further verses to illustrate this concept of “the way of God”. For example, the phrase from verse 37: “God lets go astray him who wills (to go astray)”, is a reminder that God guides those who seek the truth through the abundant evidence available to them \((afaq o anfus ki nishaniyon ko dekh kar haqiqat ke talib bante hain, ibid, p. 289)\). Furthermore, the phrase from verse 31: “God alone has the power to decide what shall be”, states that victory and defeat take place according to “the way of God” \((hidayat o zalalat ke bab mein us ki jo sunnat hai wo isi ke mutabiq in ke sath ma’ama karega, ibid, p. 291)\). Again, Islahi seems to be hinting at the future victory of the Muslims in Mecca.

\(^{98}\) In Surah An Nahl, Islahi makes a distinction between two kinds of punishment, the first of which consists of the calamities and suffering people experience in this world, which is meant to stir them into action and to reform their lives, and the second kind of punishment comes only in the next world.
Conclusions

Islahi begins by saying that the present Surah is the twin of the previous one, Surah Yusuf. However, I find these two Surahs very different in their subject matter and I fail to see how they could form a pair on the basis of their theme (‘umud). The only way these Surahs could have the same theme is by approaching them with a certain pre-conceived notion of their subject matter and understanding all other aspects in this particular light.

Islahi says that this Surah sets out to present the theme (‘umud) of victory for the Muslims and defeat for the Quraysh. Islahi finds a reference to the imminent victory of the Muslims in several verses throughout the Surah, especially in the reference to “the earth” in verse 41 (al ard se murad yahan sar zamin makka hai, ibid, p. 300). Islahi has predisposed the reader to understand this victory in a physical, material sense.

Islahi understands this Surah as describing the slow but steady spread of Islam (islam khud apne ghar mein to is daur mein mazlum raha lekin bahar is ko farogh hasil ho raha tha, ibid, p. 300). Islahi usually describes the history of religion (din) as a phenomenon of the past according to the historical narratives in the Qur’an. However, in the present Surah and in Surah An Nur, he explains din in the light of the subsequent history of Islam. Moreover, in the present Surah, he accepts the traditional interpretation of verse 41, about the imminent victory of the Muslims, because it conforms to the theme (‘umud) of the Surah Group.

For Islahi, the meaning of a verse emerges from its socio-political and cultural background. Hence, he views many verses in the light of the consolation and encouragement (tasalli) the Prophet received during his ordeal with the Quraysh (is roshni mein). He says that some verses refer to the political and psychological motivation of various groups of people living at the time of revelation. Furthermore, Islahi accuses one group of protecting its own power and status and another group of being concerned with its own prestige (apne iqtidar aur apni peshwai ko bachai rakhne ki ek chal hai, ibid, p. 295). Islahi’s observations are plausible but he cannot claim that these are the only implications that the Surah is making.

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99 Islahi finds confirmation of this interpretation of the verse in verse 41 of Surah AlAnbiya, cf. ibid, p. 301.
Islahi acknowledges the symbolic use of certain expressions in the Surah. He finds words that stand for rational and ethical blindness and vision (‘aqli or akhlaqi andhon aur binaon ke mafhum mein ist’emal hue hain, ibid, p. 279). Moreover, verse 19 describes intellectual and spiritual blindness (‘aql o dil ke andhon ke liye warid hua hai, ibid, p. 284). Other verses are taken in a literal or physical sense. For example, Islahi describes the garden of paradise as if it were part of our human experience. Islahi is reluctant to investigate the symbolic or metaphorical sense of these expressions.

Finally, Islahi uses the concept of “the way of God” (sunnat-i-ilahi) for his own purpose, which is to clarify the theme (‘umud) of the Surah regarding the triumph of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the defeat and humiliation of his enemies.
**Surah Ibrahim**

**Introduction**

In the introduction to Surah *Ibrahim*, Islahi refers back to verse 41 of Surah *Ar R’ad*, which he had interpreted as indicating the approaching victory of the Muslims over Mecca. Islahi says that Surah *Ibrahim* throws further light on this situation, showing how God provided prosperity for the Muslims while the Quraysh experienced loss and failure. Hence, the present Surah illustrates the basic theme (‘umud) of Surah Group Three by saying that God will strengthen the believers in this world and grant them victory in the next world as well, provided that they show patience in adversity and remain firm in their profession of the truth while facing all the obstacles on their path with complete trust in God (الله تعالى أهل إيمان كي لم يعانوا في الدنيا مازحت مثابها ثم كي يالمتوبون في الآخرة م<contextualized人民银行). Islahi says that the account of the experience of the Prophet Moses in the previous Surah has already confirmed this basic truth. Now, in Surah *Ibrahim*, the reason for the Prophet Abraham’s migration to the area of Mecca and his subsequent experience there is presented as a kind of mirror in which the Quraysh could understand their own situation (اتباع سبأنة المقصود قرية في ياقين أن يكون ذلك علاجًا لياتمهون في الحياة القائمة والثواب الحاضر الذي يتطورون فيه، ibid). In other words, Islahi views the Surah as giving further clarification and definition to the basic theme (‘umud) of the Surah Group by stipulating that the Muslims will be victorious and the Quraysh will experience defeat.

**The Social Context**

Islahi achieves greater clarity regarding the theme (‘umud) by reflecting on the language and the context of the Surah. For instance, he says that, despite the general tone of the language, the Surah is directed specifically to the Muslims (كِتَابَ الأَرْضِ علّمهَا لِلْمُسْلِمْنَ أَنْ كَيْلَةٌ مَّيْتٌ حَيْثُ يَنْزِلُونَ لَا يَلِدُونَ وَلَا يَتَمُّونَ، ibid, p. 312). Moreover, the context indicates that the addressees are the Quraysh (سِيَاقُ الْمِيْتِ أَثْنَاءَهُمْ فَتْحًا نَظِيرًا وَمَعَاذَةً نَظِيرًا، ibid, p. 328).
Furthermore, even though verses 42-43 are obviously addressed to the Prophet, the reprimand contained in these verses is directed to the Quraysh (ayat mein khitab zahir alfaz ke e’tibar se to peghambar salta allahu alayhi wa sallam se hai lekin is mein jo shadid ‘atab hai wo tamam tar quraysh par hai, ibid, p. 337). Islahi makes precisely the same remark about verse 47 (is ka rukh kuffar o mushrlik ki taraf hai, ibid, p. 338). Similarly, Islahi says that the frequent references to punishment are directed to the Quraysh. Although he makes a passing remark about the way such punishment affects the individual himself (insan khuda ke haq ko bhi talaf karta hai aur khud apne nafs ke haq ko bhi, ibid, p. 330) his primary focus is on the Quraysh as a group.

Islahi places verses 5-8 in the context of the difficulties the Muslims were having with the Jews, who were siding with the Quraysh against Islam (yahud ko mutanabbah karna tha jo islam ki mukhalafat ke josh mein apna sara wazan quraysh ke palre mein dal rahe they, ibid, p. 309). Islahi says the word for “your Sustainer” (rabbukum) shows that verse 7 was addressed to the Jews (cf. ibid, p. 312). Just as the Quraysh had abandoned the teaching of the Prophet Abraham, so the Jews had turned a deaf ear to the warnings of the Prophet Moses (cf. ibid, pp. 309-310). Likewise, as the Israelites passed through many difficulties before achieving their freedom, in a similar way the Muslims will have to undergo many trials before tasting victory (azmaishen bahut pesh ati hain . . . lekin akhir kar kamyabi ahl iman hi ko hasil hoti hai, ibid, p. 312). Moreover, Islahi applies lessons derived from the historical narratives concerning the Prophet Moses to the experiences of the Muslims at the time of revelation. For instance, Islahi says that verse 6 is a warning to the Israelites not to oppose Islam in the way they had already rejected Moses (islam ke mukhalafat, ibid, p. 311). Islahi thus understands these verses against the background of the socio-political realities of the Muslim community at the time of revelation.

Islahi says that the historical period in which verses 13-14 were revealed is evident from the text of the verses themselves (in ayat se is surah ke zamana nuzul par bhi roshni parti hai, ibid, p. 317):

But they who denied the truth spoke (thus) unto their apostles: “We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return forthwith to our ways!”

Whereupon their Sustainer revealed this to His apostles: “Most certainly shall We destroy these evildoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell on earth (long) after they have passed away:
this is (My promise) unto all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warning!"

These verses form part of the historical narrative of the Prophets that lived before the last Prophet. But Islahi sees in these same verses a reference to the socio-political context of the nascent Muslim community in Mecca. He says that the verses point to the decision of the Muslims to migrate because of the extremely difficult situation the Quraysh were creating for the Muslims (Ye baten da’wat ke is daur mein farmaii gayi hain jab Quraysh ne apne zulm o satm se aise halat paida kar diye hain ke . . . hijrat ke siwa koi aur rah baqi nahin rah gayi hai, ibid). Islahi says that the verses themselves highlight this context.

A further example of the way Islahi discovers the context in the verses of the Surah is the specific connotation he gives to the reference to “God’s blessings” in verse 28:

Art thou not aware of those who have preferred a denial of the truth to God’s blessings?

Islahi says these blessings are a reference to the peaceful life in the towns at the time of revelation (shahri zindagi ka sakun, ibid, p. 328) as well as to the fertile, agricultural land from which the Quraysh were able to gain sustenance (ek wadi ghair zi zar’ mein rizq ofazal ke darwaze khole, ibid). Islahi’s interpretation is influenced by the overall theme of victory for the Muslims in the region of Mecca (sar zamin makka mein, ibid, p. 332), which he had posited as the main idea (‘umud) of the Surah. Hence he stresses that Abraham prayed for a suitable location as a basis for his descendants (markaz qaim kar saken, ibid, p.330) and his prayer was answered, for the Quraysh had become the leaders, not only of the khana k’aba, but of the whole region around it (quraysh ko khana ka’ba ki pasbani ki badaulat sare mulk mein amamat o siyadat ka darja hasil ho gaya, ibid, p. 332). As a result of Abraham’s prayer, the region around the khana ka’ba soon became known as the center of Arabia (cf. ibid) and Mecca became the center for trade in the region (makka tamam ‘arab ki tajarat ka markaz ban gaya, ibid, p. 334). Islahi also highlights the function of the khana ka’ba as a place for prayer (khana ka’ba asl mein namaz ka markas hai, ibid, p. 333). Consequently, Islahi can argue that the Quraysh do not have any further claim over the khana ka’ba because they have disregarded its main function (tauhid aur namaz sab kuch zaivy’ kar baite, ibid).

Islahi says that the coherence of the Surah is shown by the many references to the theme (‘umud) concerning the eventual victory of the Muslims over
the Quraysh (quraysh... ka thakana jahanam hai. us ke ba’ed musalmanon ko kamyabi ki basharat hai, ibid, p. 326). For example, Islahi says that a phrase from verse 30 refers to this same ‘umud:

Say: “Enjoy yourselves (in this world), but, verily, the fire will be your journey’s end!”

Islahi repeats that the Quraysh had been blessed by God in so many ways and had been charged with custodianship of the holy places (khuda ne in ko haram ki pasbani ki badaulat tamam ‘arab ki siyadat o qayadat bakhshi, ibid, p. 328). Since the Quraysh have forfeited their trust, the verse is an allusion to the fact that they would soon be defeated (cf. ibid) for God will provide a safe place for the believers (jo log tauhid par qaim hain allah ta’ala in ko dunya aur akhirat donon mein rusukh qadam aur tamakan bakhshega, ibid, p. 323).

The language and the context of verse 31 also contain an allusion to the coming victory of the Muslims over their opponents (musalmanon ke lie mustaqbil ki kamyabi ki basharat bhi muzamar hai, ibid, p. 329). The verse is a call to the Muslims (ye pegham musalmanon ke liye hai, ibid):

(And) tell (those of) My servants who have attained to faith that they should be constant in prayer and spend (in Our way), secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them as sustenance.

Islahi says the verse presents the Muslims with the opportunity to take charge of the holy places, which have been violated by the Quraysh (ab ahl iman ke liye ye mauqa’ hai ke wo in maqasid ke liye apne ap ko taiyar karen aur is amanat ke amin banen, ibid).

It is interesting to note how Islahi finds the same specific context in the personal pronoun in verse 34, which addresses mankind as such (ye khitab insan se bahaisiyat insan hai, ibid, p. 330):

And (always) does He give you something out of what you may be asking of Him; and should you try to count God’s blessings, you could never compute them.

(And yet,) behold, man is indeed most persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ingrate!

Islahi says that, despite the general connation, the message is meant specifically for the unbelievers (lafz insan agarche ‘am hai lekin rue sakhan inhi mushrikin ki taraf hai jin ka zikr upar ki aят mein guzra, ibid). Islahi says that the verse seems to be a general reference because it is not appropriate to address the unbelievers directly (cf. ibid). However, the verse is a specific reference to the social context at the time of revelation. It is
noteworthy that Islahi passes over another general word for “mankind” (an nas) that is used in verse 1:

A divine writ (is this – a revelation) which We have bestowed upon thee from on high in order that thou might bring forth all mankind, by their Sustainer’s leave, out of the depths of darkness into the light.

It is clear that Islahi’s aim is to highlight the specific context of the Muslims and the Quraysh. Hence, he interprets the Surah in this light (is roshni mein).

**Different Kinds of Language**

Islahi understands the language that is employed to describe the punishment given to unbelievers in a *prima facie* way. For example, verses 15-17 say:

And (thus it is:) every arrogant enemy of the truth shall be undone (in the life to come), with hell awaiting him; and he shall be made to drink of the water of most bitter distress, gulping it (unceasingly,) little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. And death will beset him from every quarter – but he shall not die: for (yet more) severe suffering lies ahead of him.

Islahi paraphrases these verses in his own words without further comment, except to say that their punishment on earth will be continued in hell (cf. ibid, p. 318). But it would seem that the style of the language in these verses about hell could be understood as a severe warning rather than as a description of what will actually take place there. As verse 18 makes clear, the style throughout this passage is a parable (ye in mushrikin ke ’amal ki tamsil hai, ibid, p. 320). Instead of investigating the language of the parable, Islahi accepts the language in its *prima facie* meaning.

For Islahi, a rational approach is one that expresses the content of the verses according to a logical progression of concepts. This is clear from the way Islahi understands the parables in terms of rational, logical arguments (upar ki ayat mein shirkiya o kufriya ’amal ki tamsil bayan hui. ab age ki ayat mein shirkiya ‘aqaid o nazriyat aur tauhid aur is par mabni ‘aqaid o nazriyat ki tamsil bayan ho rahi hai, ibid, p. 323). Consistent with his view of a parable as simply a means to express doctrines and arguments, Islahi provides three “truths” that are contained in the parable on God’s unity (tauhid ke tamsil, ibid, p. 325). Moreover, he says that the “parable of a corrupt word” in verse 26 (kalima shirk ki tamsil, ibid) is an expression of the fact that shirk has neither natural nor rational foundation (shirk ki koi buniyad na ‘aql o fitrat ke andar hai, ibid, p. 326).
Islahi gives another example of his rational approach in his comment on verses 19-20:

Art thou not aware that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with (an inner) truth? He can, if He so wills, do away with you and bring forth a new mankind (in your stead): nor is this difficult for God.

He says the verse is addressed to the Quraysh (ye wazeh alfaz mein quraysh ko dhamki hai, ibid, p. 321) reminding them that their behavior has contradicted the purpose of their creation by God (ye dunya kisi khilandarey ka khel tamasha nahin hai balke allah ne is ko ghaiyat o maqsud ke sath paida kiya hai aur tumhara wujud is ghaiyat o maqsud ke bilkul khilaf ho kar rah gaya hai, ibid). Since Allah is both merciful and just, it would be easy (and reasonable) for him to destroy these people who have committed so many injustices (in logon ko fana kar dena is par kiyun gran guzrega, ibid, p. 321). Islahi implies that people who reject the unity of God go against their own reason (tauhid ki bunyad ‘aql o fitrat mein bhi hai, ibid, p. 323).

The same prima facie approach to language is displayed in Islahi’s description of the conversation between the weak and “those who had gloried in their arrogance” (verse 21) as well as in the conversation between the devil and those who followed him (verse 22). Islahi fails to comment on the style or nature of the language, focusing solely on the content of the conversations related in these verses (cf. ibid, pp. 321-322). Yet Islahi does refer to a specific style of language (balaghat zaban ka ye ek uslub hai, ibid, p. 332) used by Abraham with respect to the idols in verse 36:

for, verily, O my Sustainer, these (false objects of worship) have led many people astray!

However, he does not analyze the concept of “idols” (buton, ibid, p. 332), leaving the reader with the impression that these were false objects of worship in the narrow sense of the word (quraysh ne in tamam ni ‘maton ko apne dewaton ke khate mein dal dia hai, ibid, p. 330).\(^{100}\) Similarly, the

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\(^{100}\) Muhammad Asad presents a broader understanding of these idols. He writes:

“The term ‘idols’ (asnam, sing. sanam) does not apply exclusively to actual, concrete representations of false ‘deities’: for shirk – that is, an attribution of divine powers or qualities to anyone or anything beside God – may consist also, as Razi points out, in a worshipful devotion to all manner of ‘causative agencies and outward means to an end’ – an obvious allusion to wealth, power, luck, people’s favour or disfavour, and so forth – ‘whereas genuine faith in the oneness and uniqueness of God (at tauhid al mahtf) consists in divesting oneself of all inner attachment to (such) causative agencies and in being convinced that there exists no real directing power apart from God’ ”. Asad (1980), p. 378, footnote 50.
correct meaning of the word for “clothed” (sarabil) in verse 50 must be “clothes” because of the context (yahan mauqa' kalam dalil hai, ibid, p. 339). The context (mauqa' kalam) viewed in this way supports the theme (‘umud) of the Surah.
Conclusions

Islahi states that the Surah is directed to the Muslims and to the leaders of the Quraysh. He draws this conclusion on the basis of the context (siyaq o sabaq dalil hai, ibid, p. 328) and by referring to the direction of the speech (is ka rukh kuffar o mushrikin ki taraf hai, p. 338). According to Islahi, it is not appropriate for the Qur'an to address the unbelievers directly (cf. ibid, p. 330). He offers no justification for this view.

Moreover, the historical period in which verses 13-14 were revealed is evident from the text of the verses themselves (in ayat se is surah ke zamana muzul par bhi roshni parti hai, ibid, p. 317). Islahi discovers the conditions in which the Muslims were living from the text itself (is daur mein . . . quraysh ne apne zulm o sitm se aise halat paida kar diye hain, ibid). Furthermore, Islahi allows the theme ('umud) to indicate that the meaning of "God's blessings" (ni'mah) in verse 28 is actually a reference to the region around Mecca (sar zamin makka mein, ibid, p. 332). The text suggests the context and the context leads to the theme and back again to the text – according to the method of the hermeneutical circle.

Islahi outlines the history of din from a socio-political point of view according to which Abraham’s prayer was a prayer for a suitable location. As a result, the region around the khana ka ‘ba soon became known as the center of Arabia and Mecca became the center for trade in the region (makka tamam ‘arab ki tajarat ka markaz ban gaya, ibid, p. 334). Since the Quraysh forfeited their right to be the custodians of the khana ka ‘ba, they would soon be defeated and the Muslims would be victorious (musalmanon ko kamyabi ki basharat hai, ibid, p. 326).

Islahi’s rational approach to the parables enables him to summarize them in clear concepts. By presenting the three “truths” contained in the parable on God’s unity in verses 21-22, he shows that the parable provides a foundation for the main theme ('umud) of the Surah. However, instead of investigating the style of the language used in these verses, Islahi becomes preoccupied with the content of the conversations related in verses 21-22 and draws conclusions based on his own logical way of thinking. As a result, despite a passing reference to a specific style of language (balaghat zaban ka ye ek
uslub hai, ibid, p. 332), Islahi’s analysis is limited to a discussion of idols (buton) and the nature of hell using language that is physical or material. In contrast, Islahi investigates the two possible meanings of the word for “clothed” (sarabil) in verse 50 and decides on the correct meaning of the word from the context (yahan mauqa’ kalam dalil hai, ibid, p. 339) because it best supports the theme (‘umud) of the Surah. Islahi thus makes the Surah coherent by supplying his own content for the language and the style of the Surah.
Surah Al Hijr

Introduction

The rejection of the message of the Qur'an by the Quraysh is the reality that dominates Islahi’s commentary on this Surah. Islahi describes the way God threatens the Quraysh with punishment in this world and in the hereafter while repeatedly encouraging the Prophet in view of the rejection he experiences.

Whereas the previous Surah had already expressed the contrast between the threat of punishment for the unbelievers and the constant encouragement and consolation (tasalli, vol. 4, p. 343) for the Prophet and his followers, the same contrast is described in much more detail in Surah Al Hijr (pichhli surah ke akhir mein kuffar ke liye jo tahdid o wa'id aur anhazrat salla allahu alayhi o sallam ke liye jo taskin o tasalli mujmal alfaz mein warid hui hai wo is surah mein bilkul samne a gayi hae, ibid). The Prophet is reminded that the logic of the Qur'an presents the argument in a clear way (ye quran bajae khud ek wazeh hujjat hai, ibid). Hence, the Prophet should not be overly concerned with the fact that people ridicule and reject his message as nonsense. Previous Prophets had to endure a similar fate. Even miracles would not help to dismiss their doubts. The Prophet is advised to ignore these people for the time will come when they will be thinking, “if only we had accepted the message of the Prophet and the Qur’an and become Muslims” (mumin o muslim bane hote, ibid).

The Coherent Universe

The title Islahi gives to his commentary (tadabbur-i-quran) indicates the place that rational reflection has in his methodology. Islahi stresses the need for reflection (tadabbur) to emphasize the believers’ own responsibility to observe the signs (nishaniyan) provided by God in nature and to draw the logical conclusion about the need for accountability on the Last Day. Similarly, unbelievers will have no excuse for protest on the Day of Reckoning because they are constantly being invited to use their senses and their reason. The word for “truth” (haq) in verse 8:

We never send down angels otherwise than in accordance with the (demands) of truth,

is understood by Islahi to refer to a human being’s ability to decide for himself (haq ke ma’ni yahan faislah ke hain, ibid, p. 348). He says that God
wishes all human beings to use their reason (allah ta’ala ye chahta hai ke log apni ‘aql aur samajh se kam len aur afaq o anfus mein jo nishaniyan maudud hain . . . in par ghaur kare, ibid). According to Islahi, it will be obvious to those who use their reason that the harmony and coherence of the universe demand a Day of Reckoning. The theme (‘umud) of Surah Group Three is based on the observation of harmony and order in the universe and the implication that a day of reckoning will bring victory to the Muslims and defeat to the Quraysh.

Islahi develops his notion regarding the coherence of the Qur’anic text (nazm kalam, ibid, p. 352) by reflecting on the harmony and coherence apparent in the universe. Verses 16-25 express and confirm the message of the Prophet by drawing attention to the signs in the universe (in nishaniyon ke taraf tawajah dalai gai hai, p. 349). The limitations of modern science make it impossible to predict the outcome of the break-up of constellations (sains ke bas se bahar hai, ibid). Yet to anyone with an open mind (jin ke andar sochna samajhne ki salahiyat maujud hai, ibid), the universe provides abundant evidence that the world is not just the result of a game or of an accident (ye kisi khilandarey ka khel aur kisi ittifaqi hadsa ke taur par zahur mein ajane wali chiz nahin hai, ibid) but the creation of a wise and powerful Creator who has not simply left the world to its own devices. The coming Day of Reckoning is, for Islahi, the logical conclusion to these observations (ye lazim hai ke wo ek aisa din bhi laye jis mein wo sab ko ikatha kar ke in ke ‘amal nek o bad ka hisab kare aur in ke ‘amal ke mutabiq in ko jaza ya saza de, ibid).

In further support of his notion of coherence, Islahi stresses the impossibility for the Creator to have abandoned his creation. For if the Creator were to do this, the world would disintegrate and human civilization would disappear (wo agar kisi chiz ko bhi . . . chaur deta hai to is zamin ka sara nazam darham barham ho ke rah jata aur insanon ke bajas is mein koi aur hi makhluq abad hoti ya ye bilkul ghair abad ho ke rah jati, ibid, p. 353). For Islahi, verses 20-21 point to the way God has provided a well-ordered system (nazam rabubiyyat, ibid) whose balance and proportion is so evident (is tuwazin o tanasub ki taraf isharah hai jo khaliq kainat ke tamam kamon mein maudud hai, ibid). The continuing existence of the world demands that everything remains in balance (har chiz ek tanasub se sath zahur mein aye, ibid) and cannot be the result of an accident (na to kisi ittifaqi hadsa ke taur par zahur mein a gayi hain, ibid) as the unbelievers claim. Islahi’s emphasis on the signs of a structured and well-ordered universe (ye khuda hi ka
intizam aur isi ki rahmat hai ke us ne tumhare liye ye intizam kar rakha hai, ibid, p. 354) leads him to the conclusion regarding the day of accountability. As verse 25 says:

And, behold, it is thy Sustainer who will gather them all together (on Judgment Day); verily, He is wise, all-knowing!”

Islahi understands this verse to be the logical conclusion of this sequence of verses (is ke hakim hone ka taqaza hai ke wo ek roz jaza o saza laye, ibid). The point that Islahi wants to make is that the Qur’an is a coherent witness to the reality of a coherent universe.

Islahi refers explicitly to the concept of coherence to explain the “seven gates” leading into hell, mentioned in verse 44. From the point of view of coherence (nazm kalam ke pahlu se), hell needs to be large enough to cater for a large number of unbelievers (khuda ne aisi mujrimon ko saza dene ke liye bari wazih jahanam tayyar kar rakhi hai, ibid, p. 361). According to Islahi, there is a logical connection between the extent of hell and coherence (nazm kalam) in the fact that many unbelievers may have to be punished on the Day of Reckoning, in keeping with the theme (‘umud) of the Surah Group. In other words, it is consistent that the Surah mentions the capacity of hell since it has constantly been warning the unbelievers of their coming fate. In contrast, verses 45-48 are a suitable ending to this group of verses because they describe what is in store for the believers (at ye in logon ka injam hayan ho raha hai jo khuda se darne wale aur is ke ahkam par ‘amal karne wale hain, ibid, p. 362).

Islahi provides a lengthy explanation of the phrase from verse 87: “seven of the oft-repeated (verses)”, saying that it refers to the pairing of the Surahs (quran ki tamam suraten jora jora hain, ibid, p. 377) and to the seven groups of Surahs to be found in the Qur’an (quran goya sat abwab par mushtamal hai, ibid, p. 378).¹⁰² Islahi alludes to the themes (mazamin) of the various Surahs and Surah Groups (in abwab aur in faslon mein mazamin mushtarak bhi hain, ibid) and says that each Surah and Surah Group has its own point of view that distinguishes it from the others (ek khas intiazi pahlu bhi hai jo in ko ek dusre se mumayyaz karta hai, ibid).

¹⁰² A more common view among scholars is that verse 87: “seven of the oft-repeated (verses)” is a reference to the seven verses of Surah Al Fatihah.
The Social Context

Verse 9 shows that the Qur'an was revealed at a time of hardship for the Prophet:

> Behold, it is We Ourselves who have bestowed from on high, step by step, this reminder: and, behold, it is We who shall truly guard it (from all corruption).

Islahi says that these are words of consolation for the Prophet (ye peghambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko nihayat parzor alfaz mein taskin o tasalli di gayi hai, ibid, p. 348). So that God's consolation might have a greater impact on the Prophet, verses 10-13 describe the way all the Prophets were rejected by their people but consoled by God (taskin o tasalli ke mazmun ko mazid muakkad, ibid, p. 349). Interpreting the verses as consolation and encouragement for the Prophet gives further strength to the theme ('umud) of the Surah Group, namely, the eventual victory of the Prophet and his disciples and the downfall of their opponents.

Verses 26-48 give the original purpose for the account of creation (quran ka maqsud asli, ibid, p. 357). He says that the purpose of this account is not to describe the creation of human beings but to express the abiding hostility between human beings and iblis (is ki aur adam ki zuriyyat mein ek mustaqil wajh 'anad o hasad bani, ibid) and to explain the nature of the opposition that the Prophet had to face. Islahi says that those who rejected the Prophets cannot claim that there were insufficient arguments to substantiate the message of the Prophets (rasulon ki baton ki sadaqat sabit karne ke liye dalilen maujud nahin hain, ibid, p. 354) or that no miracles were forthcoming. Islahi highlights the freedom of choice contained in verses 41-42:

> Said He: 'This is, with Me, a straight way': verily, thou shalt have no power over My creatures – unless it be such as are (already) lost in grievous error and follow thee (of their own will)

As a result, Islahi argues that these people have only themselves to blame (sirf shamat zadah hi honge jo is sidhi rah ko chaur kar koi kaj pich wali rah ikhtiyar karengay, ibid, p. 360). The fact that a group of people remained faithful to God (khuda ke mukhlas bande, ibid, p. 354) proves that iblis has power only over those human beings that choose to follow him (jo teri perwi karna chahenge aur gumrahi ko pasand karengay, ibid).
Similarly, Islahi describes the context of revelation by highlighting the purpose for the arrival of the Prophet Abraham’s guests. Islahi identifies verses 49-79 as a separate group of verses revealed for the special purpose of warning the Quraysh that their desire to have angels come as messengers would result in making the same demands on them as it did on the house of Lot (is sarguzasht ko sunane se maqsud quraysh ko agah karna hai ke agar farishton ko dekhne ka arman rakhte ho to is injam se duchar hone ke liye bhi tayyar raho jo qaum lot ka hua, ibid, p. 362). Consequently, verse 49, the first verse of the group, deals with the incorrect impression that God would treat believers and unbelievers alike (nek aur bad donon is ki nazar mein yaksan hain, ibid, p. 365). On the contrary, in keeping with the theme ('umud) of the Surah, the believers will be successful (hilakhir wohi log kamyab o bamurad hote hain) and, after God has provided them with sufficient arguments (hujjat tamam), the unbelievers will be punished (bilakhir in ko in ke is inharafki saza mil ke rahti hai, ibid).

The rest of the story related in this group of verses deals primarily with the theme of the punishment in store for the unbelievers (itmam hujjat ke ba’d ‘azab-i-ilahi ka faislah, ibid, p. 369) and the nature of the punishment that was meted out to Lot’s people (is ‘azab ki nau ‘iyat, ibid, p. 370). These verses were meant for the Quraysh (kuffar quraysh) whose daily journeys brought them in close proximity to the ruins left by the destruction of Lot’s people (aye din in ko guzarna parta hai, ibid, p. 371). Islahi’s conclusion once again confirms the theme ('umud) of the Surah, namely, reward for the virtuous and punishment for the evildoers (ahl-i-haq ko agarche imtehanat pesh ate hain lekin bilakhir wohi khuda ki rahmat ke sazawar taharte hain aur in ke dushman pamal ho ke rahte hain, ibid). The last Prophet is encouraged to hold firm to the message he was asked to deliver by remaining certain of the fact that the present generation of Quraysh will experience the same fate as earlier peoples did if they persist in their rebellious attitudes, though the Prophet and his disciples will be rewarded (anjamkar ki kamyabi tumhara aur tumhare satheon hi ka hisah hai, ibid, p. 372). Islahi actually describes the natural disasters that occurred to these people (zulm ki padash mein gudrat ki taraf se in ke liye zahir hota hai, ibid, p. 374), after all the arguments to persuade them to believe in the Prophets’ messages had been clearly presented (itmam-i-hujjat ke ba’d, ibid). Moreover, explicit mention is made of the people of Al Hijr in verse 80 (as

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103 Islahi refers to the people of Lot as “unbelievers”. However, it would be more correct to say that they were punished for their immorality. Islahi fails to clarify that nations were punished for their injustice, immorality and evildoing rather than for their unbelief.
other names had been mentioned earlier) because the Quraysh were familiar with all these people (cf. ibid). In other words, this description of the natural disasters that came to unbelievers in past times is directed to the Quraysh at the time of revelation.
Conclusions

The argument of the Surah, according to Islahi, is that there are abundant signs (nishaniyan) in this well-ordered universe pointing to the need for final accountability. Islahi concludes that the Surah is a coherent statement of this logical necessity. Since it is obvious for those who use their reason ('aql aur samajh) that the harmony and coherence of the universe point to a Day of Reckoning, the Qur'an must also be coherent because it is an expression of the same message. Islahi has used an argument based on logical necessity to argue for the coherence of the Qur'an.

Islahi views the entire context of this Surah in the light of (is roshni mein) the opposition and oppression that the Quraysh were bringing against the Muslims. Hence, the reference to the extent of hell in verse 44 is logically demanded by the possibility of numerous people being consigned to hell as a result of their life on earth. Similarly, the Prophet Abraham’s guests are a warning for the Quraysh and the verses describing the punishment that was meted out to Lot’s people are meant for the Quraysh. Likewise, mention is made of the people of Al Hijr for the sake of the Quraysh because they were familiar with these people. The argument for the coherence of the Surah depends for its plausibility on the way the Surah has been understood as a rational argument in response to the struggle between the Muslims and the Quraysh. The theory of the coherence of the Qur'an is intimately connected with this specific period of history.

In the course of presenting this argument, Islahi draws a sharp line of division separating two parties, exposing them as two groups in open conflict with each other in the way that good is opposed to bad (nek aur bad, ibid, p. 365). Islahi describes the first group as God’s virtuous people (khuda ke mukhlas bande, ibid, p. 354) and as those who are truthful (ahl-i-haq, ibid, p. 371). He sets up an opposition between the believers (mumin o muslim, ibid, p. 343) and the unbelievers (kuffar quraysh, ibid, p. 371), who are like criminals worthy of punishment (khuda ne aisi mujrimon ko saza dene ke liye, ibid, p. 361). Islahi sets up this radical opposition in order to highlight the motif of victory for the Muslims and defeat for the Quraysh as it is expressed in the theme ('umud). One is left with the impression that Islahi is trying to prove the correctness of his own version of the theme of the Surah.
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Islahi discovers this radical opposition in other Surahs in this Surah Group as well. For instance, the distinction between men (admi) and animals (janwar) is made by Islahi in his comment on Surah An Nahl to describe those who are of sound mind (jo log apni 'aql ki qadar karte, ibid, p. 429) and who use their reason ('aql se kam le, ibid, p. 397) as compared with those who do not. The latter cannot see the evidence in the universe pointing to the existence of a Creator who will demand accountability on the Last Day. Such are the insane people who have made deities out of the rivers and the oceans (nadanon ne, ibid). In short, the believers are considered completely preserved from all contamination (bilkul mahfuz ho jayen, ibid, p. 450). They are quite distinct from the Quraysh who spread corruption (ashrar o mufsidin, ibid, p. 533) according to verse 83 of Surah Al Isra.

Moreover, in Surah Maryam, Islahi views society in terms of a polarization between “people immersed in the world” (dunya ke paristar, ibid, 681) and “believing people” (bandah mumin, ibid). He divides society into the oppressors (zalimon, ibid, p. 679) and the God-fearing people (ahl taqwa, and ahl haq, ibid). Islahi also refers to “the stupidity of the unbelievers” (mushrikin 'arab ki hamaqat, ibid, p. 675) and to “foolish people” (bewaquf logon, ibid). It seems to me Islahi’s portrayal of this fundamental dichotomy among people in the world has been necessitated by his desire to demonstrate the thematic coherence of the Surah.
Surah *An Nahl*

Introduction

Islahi begins by referring to the general discussion at the beginning of Surah Group Three in which he said that the struggle between truth and falsity instigated by the appearance of the last Prophet would definitely end in victory (fatah) for the Prophet and for his followers while resulting in defeat (hazimat) for those who oppose him (wo lazman rasul aur is par iman lane walon ki fatah aur is ke jhutlane walon ki hazimat par khatm hoti hai, vol. 4, p. 383). On the basis of selected verses from the Surahs belonging to Group Three, Islahi argues that the general theme ('umud) of Group Three is the triumph of the believers and the humiliating defeat in store for their opponents.

Now, in Surah *An Nahl*, the same theme is brought out by means of a new style (ye haqiqat ek neyi uslub se is surah mein bhi wazeh ki gayi hai, ibid). According to Islahi, verse 30 expresses the theme ('umud) of this Surah regarding the success (farozmandi, ibid) of the believers:

Good fortune awaits, in this world, all who persevere in doing good; but their ultimate state will be far better still: for, how excellent indeed will be the state of the God-conscious (in the life to come)!

A further expression of the theme ('umud) is to be found in verse 41 of the Surah:

Now as for those who forsake the domain of evil in the cause of God, after having suffered wrong (on account of their faith) – We shall most certainly grant them a station of good fortune in this world, but their reward in the life to come will be far greater yet.

Islahi says that these verses promise the believer a certain power and authority, even in this world (ham in ko dunya mein bhi iqtidar o tamkan 'ata karte hain, ibid). The previous Surah ended with a word of consolation (tasalli, ibid) for the Prophet, who was being harassed by those who scoffed at his message. Acting as a link with the previous Surah, the first verse of Surah *An Nahl* tells these same people (in mutakbarin hi ko khitab kar ke) that they cannot assume their idols will be able to save them from God's action (wo in ko khuda ki pakr se bacha lenge, ibid). As verse 1 says:

God’s judgment is (bound to) come: do not, therefore, call for its speedy advent!
The Theme of the Surah

One of the ways Islahi argues for the coherence of the Qur’an is to show how the theme ('umud) of the whole Surah Group finds expression in each Surah of the Group. We have seen how Islahi finds the same theme ('umud) expressed in verse 30 of the present Surah. Islahi says that success and prosperity will come to the believers in this world (in ke liye dunya mein bhi bhalai aur kamyabi hai, ibid, p. 405). Islahi stresses that the verse promises success in this world (sarih alfaz mein is dunya mein bhi kamyabi o nusrat ki basharat hai, ibid), meaning victory for the Prophet and his followers (rasul aur is ke sathiyon ke liye is dunya mein bhi ghalba aur iqtidar lazmi hai, ibid).

Furthermore, verse 41 deals with the same theme. Islahi says that the verse refers to those who were persecuted on account of their religion and were forced to leave their own houses to settle elsewhere (cf. ibid, p. 411). The verse is a promise that they will be strong and powerful even in this world (dunya mein bhi in ko achhi tarah mutamakkin karega, ibid). Since Islahi had already alluded to verse 41 in his analysis of verse 30, it is clear that he considers the two verses to be thematically linked.

Islahi finds another clear statement of this theme ('umud) in verse 128:

For, verily, God is with those who are conscious of Him and are doers of good withal.

Islahi says that this last verse of the Surah expresses the help that was promised to the Muslims and the eventual victory of Islam (ye nusrat ka wa'dah aur balakhir islam aur musalmanon ke ghalba ki basharat hai, ibid, p. 465). Since God is with the righteous, they must ultimately, be victorious (lazman anjamkar ki kamyabi bhi inhi ka hissah hai, ibid).

However, a similar phrase from verse 97, which could, therefore, also be understood in line with the theme ('umud) of the Surah, was not included in this discussion by Islahi. Verse 97 says:

As for anyone – be it man or woman – who does righteous deeds, and is a believer withal, him shall We most certainly cause to live a good life; and most certainly shall We grant unto such as these their reward in accordance with the best that they ever did.

Instead of linking this verse with the theme of the Surah, Islahi launches out into a discussion of the trials men and women must undergo, stating that the trials of women must be heavier than those of men (in ka imtehan kamzaur 'ansar hone ke sabab se mardon ke imtehan se bhi ziyadah sakht tha, ibid, p.
448). The reason for this discussion seems to be that Islahi chose to focus on the phrase "be it man or woman" rather than on another phrase from the verse, namely, the "good life" that was promised to all believers.

From this short overview of Islahi's discussion of the relevant verses, it is clear that he tends to understand the success and prosperity of the Muslims and of Islam at the time of revelation in a physical, material way, which is in line with the way he understands the theme ('umud) of the entire Surah Group. Furthermore, he has highlighted those verses of the present Surah that most fitted his understanding of its theme ('umud).

The Appeal to Reason

Another way in which Islahi tries to establish the coherence of the Qur'an is to stress the way the argument of the Surah is built on reason. He concludes that, since the message of the Surah is intelligible and reasonable, the theme of the whole Surah must be coherent. Islahi draws this conclusion from verses like verse 3, which says:

> He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with (an inner) truth.

Islahi asserts that this verse points logically to the need for accountability on the Last Day. Without accountability on the Last Day, the whole of creation becomes a meaningless game (agar aisa na ho to ye tamam karkhana bilkul 'abas aur beghayat ek khel han ke rah jata hai, ibid, p. 390). Islahi finds a cross-reference to the same idea in verse 115 of Surahs/Muminun:

> Did you, then, think that We created you in mere idle play?

In fact, the same idea is mentioned in other Surahs of this Surah Group as well. In short, the work of the Creator has a purpose and the logical outcome of this purpose is the day of reckoning (is ke baghayat o bamaqsud hone ka lazmi taqaza hai ke is ke ba'd ek aisa din laye jis mein in logon par an'm farmaye, ibid, p.396). Verse 12 says:

> And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon subservient (to His laws, so that they be of use) to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who use their reason!

Islahi comments that the Creator of this universe could not allow the world to continue without arranging for some means of accountability (wo is ko ghair masul aur mutlaq al'inan nahin chorega, ibid).
Islahi says that, unless a human being uses his or her reason (‘aql se kam le, ibid, p. 397) to draw profit from all the evidence in the universe, he or she is no more than a brute beast (to wo sare se admi hi nahin hai balke nira wo tangoon par chalne wala ek janwar hai, ibid). Indeed, Islahi says that those who do not use their reason in this way are insane people who have made deities out of the rivers and oceans (nadanon ne in daryaon aur samundaron hi ko dewi dewata bana kar in ki puja aur ‘ibadat sharu’ kar di, ibid). Islahi repeats that the worship of such deities is insanity (mahz nadani hai, ibid, p. 399). The Book has been revealed to bring guidance to our minds (roshni aur ‘aql ke liye rahnumai hai, ibid, p. 413). The main point is that Islahi brings all the marvels of the universe into a thematic harmony by saying that any person with a sound mind can draw the same rational conclusions (jo log apni ‘aql ki qadar karte, ibid, p. 429). For a “reasonable person” (ma’qul insan, ibid), all these verses point to a single conclusion and so they all support the impression that the verses are thematically inter-connected.

The Social Context

Islahi gives the theme (‘umud) of the Surah further definition by claiming that certain verses refer to either the Quraysh or to the Muslims. For example, he identifies the Quraysh as the addressees of verse 4, which refers to mankind in general:

He creates man out of a (mere) drop of sperm: and lo! this same being shows himself endowed with the power to think and to argue!

Islahi says that the word for “man” (insan) is a reference to those unbelievers who were alluded to in the first verse (insan se yahan murad wohi kuffar o mushrkin hain jo upar ki ayat mein mukhatab hain, ibid, p. 390) thereby taking a general word for mankind (insan) and giving it a very specific designation. However, as Islahi himself says, the Qur’an seeks to bring awareness to people in general (quran dar haqiqat insan ki isi salahiyat ko baidar karna chahta hai, ibid, p. 397).

Islahi makes another specific identification of the addressee when he says that verse 24 describes the motivation of the leaders of the people. He says that this verse describes the way people who heard the Qur’an were consulting their leaders for advice about how to respond to its message:

and (who), whenever they are asked, “What is it that your Sustainer has bestowed from on high?” – are wont to answer, “Fables of ancient times!”
This verse describes how the great interest shown by many people in the Qurʾan was taken by the leaders of society as a threat to their position (lidadon ne ye mahsus kar ke in ke paiko is se mutaʿassir ho rahe hain aur ye chiz in ki lidari ke liye khatre ka baʿis ho sakti hai, ibid, p. 402). In response, these leaders answered the people by saying that they were preserving the traditions of the ancestors (ham apne abao ajdād ke sahih din par hain, ibid). Similarly, verse 26 reflects the same concern of the leaders of the people to preserve their authority (apni lidari ke tahaffuz ke liye, ibid, p. 403). Islahi says that the Quraysh had similar problems with the rising popularity of the Prophet (quraysh ke lidar anhazrat sallam ke mukhalafat kar rahe they, ibid, p. 403) and explains that verse 38 refers to the Quraysh (quraysh ke mutakbarin, ibid, p. 411). Verse 88 is also a reference to the Quraysh (quraysh ke in ashrar, ibid, p. 441). It is clear that Islahi has no difficulty with connecting these verses to the actual situation of conflict that existed between the Prophet and his opponents, the Quraysh.

The focus shifts to the Jews as the social context for verses 91-95. Islahi hints at a political alliance between the Jews and the Quraysh (unhone quraysh ke in lidaron ki pit tunki sharu’ kar di thiy, ibid, p. 439). Moreover, Islahi accuses the Jews in no uncertain terms of opposing Islam itself (ye yahud ki in mufsidanah koshishon ki taraf isharah hai jo wo islam ki taraf mail logon ko islam se rukhne ya islam qabul kar lene walon ko mutazilzil karne ke liye saraf kar rahe they, ibid, p. 442). Islahi even applies the parable in verse 92 directly to them (in yahud hi ko mukhatab kar ke, ibid, p. 442).104 The basis for Islahi’s concern with the Jews is his identification of the “bond with God” (‘ahd allah), mentioned in verse 91, with the covenant that the Jews had made with God (allah se jo ‘ahad tum ne bandha hai, ibid, p. 441). However, since there is no mention of any special covenant with God in the preceding or subsequent verses, the “bond with God” mentioned in verse 91 should be understood as something rooted in human nature as such.105 There seems to be insufficient evidence for understanding these verses solely in the context of Jewish opposition to the Prophet, as Islahi does.

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104 The parable of the woman spinning yarn in verse 92 is a reference to an Arabic custom and has no connection with the Jews.
105 Similarly, verse 25 of Surah Ar R ʿ ad establishes the bond with God in human nature:

But as for those who break their bond with God after it has been established (in their nature), and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth – their due is rejection (by God), and theirs is a most evil fate (in the life to come).

There is no mention of a covenant with God either in connection with this verse or in connection with the verses immediately preceding or coming immediately after this one.
Islahi says that the following verses (96-105) are a response to the objections the Jews were raising about the Qur'an (in e'tirazat ke jawab ki jo yahud ne quran ke khilaf utae they, ibid, p. 448), especially with regard to the question of abrogation, which is the topic of verses 101-103. Islahi asserts that the Jews and the Quraysh were making these objections (ye bat kahi to yahud ne lekin ye besamjhe bauje quraysh ke in lidaron ne bhi duhrane sharu’ kar di, ibid, p. 449). Islahi simply makes these assertions without providing any evidence to support these allegations against the Jews and the Quraysh.

On the other hand, Islahi says that verses 106-111 are addressed to the Muslims in order to strengthen them in facing the opposition they were experiencing (in ko khitab kar ke, ibid, p. 452). Earlier verses, such as verse 37, were also meant to console the Muslims (tasalli, ibid, p. 410). Moreover, Islahi describes the social context of the people of Mecca and mentions their social customs as a background to the concepts haram and halal (cf. ibid. p. 459-460). Islahi also says that verse 126 pertains to the specific period in which the Muslims were subject to the ridicule of their opponents (is daur se muta'alliq hai jab musalman afrad ki surat mein apne mukhalafon ke andar gire hue, ibid, p. 464):

Hence, if you have to respond to an attack (in argument), respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you; but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for (you, since God is with) those who are patient in adversity.

The situation changed, however, when the Muslims obtained political power (ek ba qa’idah munazam islami hukumat ke hadud kar aur is ke ikhtiyarat is se mukhtalif hain, ibid). Islahi’s remarks only reinforce the impression that the context he describes is that which prevailed during the time of revelation.

**Different Kinds of Language**

Islahi goes so far as to explicitly deny the metaphorical sense of some verses in order to emphasize that the punishment, which came to unbelieving nations in the past, actually happened to them. Verse 26 says:

Those who lived before them did, too, devise many a blasphemy — whereupon God visited with destruction all that they had ever built, (striking) at its very foundations, so that the roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them without their having perceived whence it came.
Islahi makes the point that destruction, in the form of earthquakes and floods, actually happened to these unbelieving peoples (ma'zab qaumen zilzilon aur bad-i-tund o sailab ke aise taufanon se halak huen jin se in ke makanon ki diwaren aur chaten sab in ke upar a paren, ibid, p. 403). Islahi goes on to say that to interpret these events metaphorically would be tantamount to saying that they never occurred (ye mahz ista'rah nahin balke bay an waqe' hai, ibid). But it seems to me that to give these events a metaphorical meaning is not the same as to say that these natural disasters never really occurred.

Significantly, there are other verses in this Surah for which Islahi does seem to accept a metaphorical interpretation. For example, the plural word for "gates of hell" in verse 29 is an indication of the extent of hell, thereby hinting at the figurative meaning of this word (lafz abwab jam' hai jis se jahanam ki wusa' ki taraf bhi isharah ho raha hai, ibid, p. 405). Similarly, Islahi says that the phrase "(gardens) through which running waters flow" in verse 31 is an expression of the beauty of the garden (ek achhe bagh ka tasawwur, ibid), thus hinting at the figurative sense of this phrase. On the other hand, he says that the verb "they enter" (yadkhulun), from the same verse, is used in its actual sense (apne haqiqi kamil ma'ni mein hai, ibid) as if to imply that this "actual sense" rules out a figurative sense. Having said this, Islahi proceeds to understand the same verb "they enter" in a metaphorical way, saying that the word points to everything that the believers in heaven could desire to have (cf. ibid).

In a similar way, Islahi argues that the word "listen" in verse 65 is used in its "actual sense" (yahan apne haqiqi ma'ni mein hai, ibid, p. 427). But the meaning could not be restricted to a physical sense of the verb "to listen" since Islahi himself says that it is a question of understanding and accepting the message (is ko samajhte aur is ko qabul karte hain, ibid), which is a metaphorical sense of the word "to listen". In addition, to determine the meaning of a word, one must take the cultural environment of the period into account (jaisa ke 'amuman zamana qadim mein rawwaj raha hai, ibid, p. 444). Islahi gives the example of the word "barter", which does not have the everyday meaning of "to buy" in verse 95 but which has a different meaning in this verse (cf. ibid).

Furthermore, Islahi gives a physical, material sense to the words describing those who forsake the domain of evil in the cause of God (hajaru fi'llah). Verse 41 reads:
Now as for those who forsake the domain of evil in the cause of God, after having suffered wrong (on account of their faith) – We shall most certainly grant them a station of good fortune in this world: but their reward in the life to come will be far greater yet.

Islahi says that the verse describes the true meaning of migration for one’s beliefs (hijrat ki haqiqat bhi wazeh hoti hai, ibid, p. 412), saying that it describes a person who is forced to leave his or her beloved native land to go elsewhere (apna mahbub watan . . . chaur kar wahan se nikalne aur dusri sar zamin ko apni panah gah banane par majbur ho jaye, ibid). This is undoubtedly one of the meanings that the term hijrah has acquired in the subsequent history of Islam but there is no evidence in the text of the Surah that would require the term to be restricted to a physical, material understanding. Islahi has a similar explanation for verse 110, even identifying Abyssinia as the place to which the believers migrated (hijrat se yahan isharah hijrat habashah ki taraf hai, ibid, 455).

One is left with the impression that Islahi understands the word hijrah according to the understanding he has inherited from the history of Islam. If this is the case with the concept hajaru fi’llah, it may be that Islahi’s reading of the history of Islam has also influenced other important concepts in his commentary. Why, for instance, does Islahi usually render the phrase amr allah as the “punishment of God” (allah ka ‘azab, ibid, p. 388) instead of the “judgment of God” (‘azab ke liye amr ilahi sadir ho chuka hai, ibid)? The words “judgment of God (amr allah) occur both in verse 1 and in verse 33:

God’s judgment is (bound to) come: do not, therefore, call for its speedy advent!

Are they (who deny the truth) but waiting for the angels to appear unto them or for God’s judgment to become manifest?

Islahi explains these verses by saying that the punishment of God has come and has destroyed these people (in par ‘azab ilahi adhamka aur us ne in ko tabah kar ke rakh dia, ibid, p. 409).

It is possible that Islahi’s intent to find further illustrations of the theme (‘umud) of the Surah regarding victory for the believers and defeat of the unbelievers has prompted him to stress the final punishment or destruction of those who reject the message of the Prophets. This would explain why Islahi consistently translates the phrase amr allah as the “punishment of
God” rather than as the “judgment of God”? However, this disregards the victory of the believers in this world, which Islahi has given great emphasis and whose fulfillment Islahi sees in the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims.

Again, the concept of *shirk*, which Islahi usually links with the worship of deities has, in some contexts, the wider meaning of oppression or even immorality, as Islahi himself admits (*quran ne jaga jaga kufr o shirk ko zulm se ta'bir kiya hai*, ibid, p. 420). Hence, with regard to verse 85:

And when they who are bent on evildoing behold the suffering (that awaits them), Islahi says that the phrase refers to those who committed *shirk* (*yahan murad wo log hain jinhone shirk kar ke*, ibid, p. 437), but the verse is an expression of *shirk* in the narrow sense (*wo dewi dewata . . . unhone khuda ka sharik banaya tha*, ibid). The narrow interpretation is an indication of Islahi’s effort to confirm the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Islahi recognizes the simile contained in the parable of the bee given in verses 68-69 as simply an image to convey a general message about wisdom (*isi tarah ye log apne tadabbur o tafakkur ki kawishon se hikmat ka shahad jam' karte hain*, ibid, p. 429). In contrast, the parable in verse 92 is applied specifically to the Jews:

Hence, be not like her who breaks and completely untwists the yarn which she (herself) has spun and made strong – (be not like this by) using your oaths as a means of deceiving one another, simply because some of you may be more powerful than others.

Islahi says the old woman depicted in this parable is an image of the Jews, as already presented by means of the parable of the dog in Surah *Al A’raf* (*jis tarah yahan yahud ki misal ek burhaya se di hai isi tarah in ki misal a’raf 175-176 mein ek aise shakhs se di hai*, ibid, p. 443). Islahi establishes the link between the meaning of the two parables through the pronoun “who” (*allazi*), which they both use, but adds that these parables do not refer to actual persons, only to the general situation (*is se maqsud mahz taswir-i-hal hai na ke kisi mata’in shakhs ki taraf isharah*, ibid). The conclusion seems

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106 We find a similar stress on God’s punishment (*'azab ilahi*) in Islahi’s comment on verse 31 of Surah *Ar R’ad*. With reference to the phrase from that verse: “sudden calamities will always befall them or will alight close to their homes; (and this will continue) until God’s promise (of resurrection) is fulfilled”, Islahi says that God’s punishment will wipe out those who reject the message of the Prophets (*agar us ne rasul ki hat na mani to bilakkir is par 'azab ilahi ayega jo is ko qalam fana kar dega*, ibid, p. 292). Islahi also mentions the other purpose of such calamities, which is to bring awareness (*ghafilon ke andar bairavi paida hota*, ibid). His stress, however, is clearly on the final destruction of the unbelievers.
to be that the pronoun who is a precarious link by which to apply both these parables to actual Jewish people, as Islahi does.

Finally, Islahi offers his own understanding of abrogation, which, he says, will facilitate the reader’s grasp of the coherence of the Surah (nazm kalam ke samajhne mein, ibid, p. 450). However, it is likely that Islahi’s understanding of these verses has been influenced by his own presuppositions and inclinations. In verse 102, we read:

Say: “Holy inspiration has brought it down from thy Sustainer by stages, setting forth the truth, so that it might give firmness unto those who have attained to faith.

It is not clear what factors have led Islahi to understand the words ruh al qudus as a reference to the angel Gabriel and the word for “truth” (haq) as describing the kind of religion (din) that is unadulterated or pure (haq se murad wo khalis aur be amiz din hai, ibid, p. 450). He says that the believers are completely preserved from all contamination (bilkul mahfuz ho jayen, ibid) and explains the stages of revelation as necessary for the development of faith (cf. ibid). These observations are not rooted in the text of the Qur’an.

The Way of God

Islahi employs the concept “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi, ibid, p. 388) right from the beginning of the Surah as a way of moving beyond the specific context of the verses. According to this concept, God sends every nation a messenger who brings complete and convincing arguments by which each nation can make a judgment between right and wrong (rasul, haq o batil ke intiyaz ke liye kasuti aur ittami hujjat ka akhri zarı’e hota hai, ibid, p. 389) and either attain salvation or be destroyed. Once the Prophet has presented his message in a clear and complete fashion, no excuse remains for any nation to claim leniency before God (ittami hujjat ke ba’d . . . koi ‘azar baqi na rahega, ibid, p. 434). Islahi uses this concept to explain the more universal meaning of several other verses of the Surah, for example, verse 84 (cf. ibid, p. 436) and verse 89 (cf. ibid, p. 438).

Islahi finds another example of “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi ke taraf isharah hai, ibid, p. 454) in verse 108:

They whose hearts and whose hearing and whose sight God has sealed — it is they, they who are heedless!
Islahi says that he has already explained this concept of “the sealing of hearts” in verse 7 of Al Baqara. It is not God who “seals” hearts but it is the person’s own response to God that seals the heart. As the phrase from verse 33 of the present Surah says:

It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves.

Islahi notes this dimension of God’s way (khuda ne in par koi zulm nahin kiya, ibid, p. 409) but does not explicitly include this point in his concept of “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi). Yet this aspect of God’s way has significant consequences for a correct understanding of God’s dealings with mankind.
Conclusions

According to Islahi, this Surah continues to elaborate on the theme (‘umud) of Surah Group Three by describing the imminent victory of the Muslims in this world (dunya mein bhi bhala aur kamyabi hai, ibid, p. 405). Islahi understands certain key verses like verse 30, verse 41, and verse 128 as indicating that this victory (ghalba) will be a physical or material one. However, by far the majority of scholars are of the opinion that no Meccan Surah refers to the victory of the Muslims. Moreover, the reference in verse 41 to people being forced to leave their homes is a reference to past peoples and not to the migration of the Muslims from Mecca to Medina. Islahi interprets verse 41 in the light of an event (hijrah) that will happen much later in history. The Surah is not an expression of consolation (tasalli) for the Prophet (peace be upon him) as Islahi claims.

Islahi appeals to reason to provide the basis for his argument that the Surah is coherent. As we saw in previous Surahs, Islahi finds the necessity for final accountability to be a logical conclusion that emerges from reflection on the harmony and coherence evident in the universe. He argues that this well-structured system could not allow human beings to play games in the world like children who are not held to account for their pastimes (agar aisa na ho to ye tamam karkhana bilkul ‘abas aur be ghayat ek khel ban ke rah jata hai, ibid, p. 390). In short, Islahi says that any person who uses his reason (‘aql se kam le, ibid, p. 397) will recognize the logical necessity for final accountability. Islahi does not relate the concept of final accountability with faith.

Islahi understands the Surah to be making a sharp distinction between the Muslims and the Quraysh. According to Islahi, the Surah divides humanity into two groups: the believers (mumin) and the unbelievers (kuffar o mushrikin, ibid, p. 390). He gives a specific designation to the general word for man (insan) in verse 4, making the word refer to either one of these two groups. However, the Qur’an is addressed to all human beings and not specifically to the groups that Islahi mentions.

Islahi says that the parables of this Surah do not refer to actual persons, only to the general situation (is se maqsud mahz taswir-i-hail na ke kisi mata’in shakhs ki taraf isharah, ibid, p. 443). Despite this assertion,

107 I have referred to this point in my conclusion to the discussion of Surah Al Hijr.
however, he says that the parable in verse 92 is directed specifically to the Jews. Islahi’s argument for this conclusion rests on his understanding of the pronoun “who” (allazi). Moreover, verses 96-105 are a response to the objections the Jews were making about the Qur’an and verses 106-11 are addressed to the Muslims who were being oppressed by their opponents. Islahi says that verse 126 pertains to the specific period (is daur se) when the Quraysh was harassing the Muslims. In short, Islahi understands all these verses in the light of (is roshni mein) the opposition between the Muslims and the Jews, who were plotting against them together with the Quraysh. One could argue, however, that there is no reference at all to the Jews in the whole of the present Surah. The Jews began plotting against the Muslims much later, after the battle of Badr and not at the time this Surah was revealed.

Islahi seems to allow a figurative meaning for “gates of hell” in verse 29 (lafz abwab jam’ hai jis se jahanam ki wusa’t ki taraf bhi isharah ho raha hai, ibid, p. 405). Similarly, the reference to gardens “through which running waters flow” in verse 31 is an expression of the beauty of the garden (ek achhe bagh ka tawawwur, ibid). On the other hand, he says that the verb “they enter” (yadkhulun), from the same verse, is used in its actual sense (apne haqiqi aur kamil ma’ni mein hai, ibid) as if to imply that this “actual sense” rules out a figurative sense. Moreover, he says that the natural disasters described in the historical narratives actually happened to punish past nations. To give these events a metaphorical meaning, however, would not be the same as to say that these events never really occurred.

By admitting that we must take the cultural environment of the period into account in order to determine the meaning of a word (jaisa ke ‘umuman zamana qadim mein riwaj raha hai, ibid, p. 444), Islahi recognizes a distinction between the cultural meaning given to a word and its actual meaning (apne haqiqi ma’ni, ibid, p. 427). But he does clarify what he means by the “actual meaning” and how to obtain it.

One is left with the impression that Islahi understands the word hijrah according to the understanding he has inherited from the subsequent history of Islam. If this is the case with the concept of migration (hijrah), it could well be the case that Islahi’s reading of the history of Islam has influenced other important concepts in his commentary. For instance, his reading of subsequent history may account for the traditional way he understands the shari’ah – particularly the laws of punishment in Islamic society.

230
Islahi constantly translates the phrase *amr allah* as the “punishment of God” rather than as the “judgment of God”. He understands punishment in a traditional, anthropomorphic way. Moreover, since Islahi understands punishment in the light of the theme (‘*umud*) of the whole Surah (*is roshni mein*), repeated references to punishment result in greater emphasis on the triumph of the believers and the utter destruction (“punishment”) of the unbelievers.
Surah Al Isra (Bani Israil)

Introduction

This Surah is the twin of the preceding one. For this reason, there is no basic difference between this Surah and the previous one, as far as the theme ('umud) is concerned (koi bunyadi farg nahin hai, vol. 4, p. 469). The difference between the two Surahs lies in the fact that the previous Surah describes only in broad outlines what the present Surah presents in much more detail. For example, in the previous Surah, both the Quraysh and the Israelites were given an invitation and a warning but the Israelites were mentioned only in passing. In contrast with the previous Surah, the present Surah addresses the Israelites explicitly and the Surah draws arguments from their own history to show that the Israelites were only deceiving themselves when they claimed they were the beloved or chosen people of God. Islahi says their own history bears witness (tumhari apni tarikh shahid hai, ibid) that God punishes them whenever the Israelites rebel against God. Islahi seems to be using the Torah as his historical source (cf. ibid, p. 481).

Islahi goes on to say that this Surah reminds the Israelites to follow the straight path that the Torah had already pointed out to them (jo taurat ke zara'e se tum par khuli gayi thi, ibid). Furthermore, the Prophet's ascension has clarified the fact (ye haqiqat bhi wazeh farmai gayi hai, ibid) that the mandate entrusted to the Israelites to guard the sacred mosque has been taken away from them because they misused the trust bestowed upon them and that this mandate has now been transferred to the unlettered Prophet (amanat khainon se chin kar is nabi ummi ke hawalah karne ka faislah ho cuka hai, ibid, p. 469).

Another example that shows how this Surah provides detailed illustrations where the previous Surah had only indicated the basic principles in their broad outlines is to be found in the way this Surah develops certain teachings that are similar to the Ten Commandments of the Torah, emphasizing that these Commandments are in harmony with the natural order of things (goya insani fitrat aur qadim asmani ta'lim donon ham ahang hain, ibid).

Finally, the previous Surah had made only a passing reference to the approaching migration to Medina (hijrat) but, according to Islahi, this Surah provides detailed instructions about it (for example, in verse 80, which

232
concerns the preparation for the migration) indicating that the time has now come for it to take place. For Islahi, this is evidence enough that the Surah was revealed just before the migration actually occurred (ye surah hijrat ke qarib zamanah mein nazal hui, ibid, p. 470).

The Coherence of the Surah

In his opening remarks, Islahi says that the theme ('umud) of the present Surah does not differ from the theme of the previous Surah (donon ke 'umud mein koi bunyadi farq nahin hai, ibid, p. 469). Moreover, after giving a summary of the contents of the Surah, Islahi concludes that it must now be obvious to the reader that each link in the Surah is connected to every other link in accordance with the predetermined central idea (ek ma'in 'umud ke taht kis tarah is surah ki har kari dusri kari se mill hui hai, ibid, p. 472). Islahi is quite clear about the central idea or theme of the Surah, which concerns the eventual victory of the Muslims and the defeat of the unbelievers. Many verses of the Surah will be viewed in the light of this central theme.

Using every opportunity to illustrate the theme ('umud) of Surah Group Three, Islahi finds an allusion to it in the very first verse of the present Surah, which speaks of the Prophet's mystic Night Journey (mi'raj). Commenting on a phrase from verse 1:

so that We might show him some of Our symbols,

Islahi explains the reason God showed the Prophet the Inviolable House of Worship (at Mecca) and the Remote House of Worship (at Jerusalem) was to indicate that the custodianship of these holy places had been taken away from those who had demonstrated they were not worthy of this responsibility and that it was now entrusted to the Prophet himself (maqsud in ke dikane se zahir hai ... ke ab ye sari amanat naqadron aur bad 'ahidon se chin kar ap ke hawale ki janey wali hai, ibid, p. 475). According to Islahi, the purpose of the Night Journey was to strengthen the Prophet in this difficult period of his life by giving him a preview of what was going to happen (jo kuch hone wala tha, ibid), namely, the defeat of the unbelievers and the success of the Muslims.

Islahi finds a similar reference to the success of the Muslims in a phrase from verse 79:

and thy Sustainer may well raise thee to a glorious station (in the life to come).
Islahi says the phrase refers to the Muslims’ expectations of becoming an established community (ye tawaq' rakho ke tumhara rab tumhen is hal mein utayega ke ek 'azim ummat ki zabanon par tumhare liye tarana hamd hoga, ibid, p. 532). Similarly, the phrase from verse 60:

And lo! We said unto thee, (O Prophet:) “Behold, thy Sustainer encompasses all mankind (within His knowledge and might)”, refers, according to Islahi, to the imminent conquest of Mecca (ye bat is waqt farmai gayi thi jab ataraf makka mein islam pahline laga aur makka aur ahl makka goya ahista ahista islam ke ghire mein a rahe they, ibid, p. 516). Islahi says that the same meaning is conveyed by verse 41 of Surah Ar Rad and verse 44 of Surah Al Anbiya. He understands these verses as the prophecy of an actual event rather than as just the expression of an imaginary idea (ye baten hawai nahin thiy balke halat in ki saf peshangoi kar rahe they, ibid), since the stubborn leaders of Mecca were actually going to taste defeat at the hands of the Muslims (cf. ibid). In fact, in all these verses, Islahi finds the same warning concerning the transfer of the mandate for custodianship of the holy places from the Quraysh to the Muslims that he had discovered in the first verse of the Surah (tauliyat o amanat in ke maujudah khain mutawaliyon se chin kar nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap par iman laney walon ke hawala ki janey wali hai, ibid).

Another verse that expresses the 'umud of the Surah is verse 81:

And say: “The truth has now come (to light), and falsehood has withered away;

for, behold, all falsehood is bound to wither away!”

Islahi says that the imminent migration (hijrat) represents the opening phase of the coming victory of the Muslims over Mecca (hijrat dar haqiqat rasul ki fatah ka dibacha hoti hai, ibid, p. 532). The present verse functioned as an affirmation of the eventual victory of the Prophet (ye ayat parhte jate goya is ayat ka masdaq manassa-i-shauhud par a gaya, ibid, p. 533). Islahi says that the approaching migration of the Muslims is thus a key to understanding the Surah (cf. ibid).

The Social and the Polemical Context

One of the principal ways in which Islahi specifies the social context of the verses is by stipulating to whom these verses were first directed. For example, he says that it is quite clear that verse 53 was directed to the Muslims to guide them while they were being harassed by their opponents (musalmanon ko zaruri hidayat, ibid, p. 511). The verses that follow are a
response to the polemical situation between the Muslims and the Jews (yahud . . . apni tamam fitna samaniyon ke saath maidan mukhalafat mein utar aye, ibid, p. 512). Moreover, verses 80-81 are not simply a general instruction in prayer:

"O my Sustainer! Cause me to enter (upon whatever I may do) in a manner true and sincere, and cause me to leave (it) in a manner true and sincere, and grant me, out of Thy grace, sustaining strength!"

In fact, these verses refer to the specific departure and arrival that is about to take place during the process of migration (ap ka niklna aur dakhil hona, ibid, p. 532). Furthermore, Islahi says that verse 83 does not describe a characteristic of mankind in general:

(it often happens that) when We bestow Our blessings upon man, he turns away and arrogantly keeps aloof (from any thought of Us);

Instead, the phrase refers specifically to the Quraysh (al insan ka lafz agarche 'am hai lekin yahan is se murad quraysh ke wohi ashrar o mufsidin hain, ibid, p. 533). These verses belong to a specific social context.

A further example of the way Islahi situates each verse in its social context is the way he links the "nine clear messages" mentioned in verse 101 with the excessive demands of the Quraysh for miracles (quraysh ye mau'jizat ke mutalbe, ibid, p. 544). Likewise, Islahi describes the context of the story about Adam and the angels, related in verses 61-65, by setting it in the context (siyaq o sabaq kalam, ibid, p. 519) of encouragement and consolation for the Prophet, whose message was being rejected (tasalli di ja rahi hai, ibid). He says that other aspects of the story have already been discussed in Surah Al Baqarah and Surah Al A'raf.

Sometimes, however, Islahi inserts his own personal reflections into his commentary on the Surah, disregarding the context of the verse. For example, verse 31 says:

Hence, do not kill your children for fear of poverty; it is We who shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily, killing them is a great sin.

Instead of understanding this verse in the light of the context at the time of revelation, as he usually does when discussing any verse, Islahi inserts his own views with regard to the modern phenomenon of family planning (maujuda zamane mein zabat wiladat, ibid, p. 499). But the verse was revealed in the context of the practice of infanticide, which was common at that time.
Likewise, Islahi inserts his own personal opinion into his comment on verse 32:

And do not commit adultery - for, behold, it is an abomination and an evil way.

Islahi says that adultery cuts at the root of society (‘ye burai saleh mu’sharah ki jar par kalkara marne wali burai hai, ibid). In fact, Islahi goes on to give his own personal views on the nature of Islamic society in general (‘islami mu’share, ibid, p. 497) and about Islamic law as well (‘hamare nazdik ma’yuda qawanin islami qamun ki bahu si barkaton se khali hain, ibid, p. 501). Islahi is of the opinion that reason and nature are at the basis of society and even of the whole of civilization (‘yahi rasta fitrat aur ‘aql ka sidha rasta hai aur yahi is ‘adal o ihsan ki zindagi ko wyjud mein lata hai jo khuda ko pasind hai aur jis par saleh mu’sharah aur saleh tamaddun ki bunyad hai, ibid, p. 491). According to Islahi, the Qur’an wants to establish a specific kind of society (‘quran jo mu’sharah qaim karna chahta hai, ibid, p. 502). In these instances, Islahi disregards the context and allows his own personal views to dominate the investigation of the verses.

Different Kinds of Language

Many examples can be found of Islahi’s prima facie way of understanding the Surah. For instance, Islahi makes a simple comment about the graphic language of verses 13-14:

And every human being’s destiny have We tied to his neck; and on the Day of Resurrection We shall bring forth for him a record which he will find wide open; (and he will be told:) “Read this thy record! Sufficient is thine own self today to make out thine account!”

Islahi says these verses are an expression of the fact that there will be no one to turn to for help on the Day of Judgment (‘hisab ke din koi bhi kisi dusre ka boj utane wala nahin banega, ibid, p. 488), disregarding other possible meanings that could emerge from a consideration of the kind of vivid language and style used in these verses. He has a similar approach to verse 71 in which people will be told to “read their record”, saying that the verb “to read” is used here in its actual meaning (‘apne haqiqi ma’ni mein iste’mal hua hai, ibid, p. 525). Furthermore, the phrase from verse 64: “and bear upon them with all thy horses and all thy men” is not a metaphor but a description of what really happened during the struggle between the Muslims and their opponents (‘mahz ista’rah hi nahn hai, balke amr waqe’ bhi hai. wo tamam janggen jo dushman-i-islam ne ahl iman ko din haq se phirne ke liye harpa ki hain, wo sab is mein dakhli hain, ibid, p. 520).
On the other hand, we also find examples of symbolic interpretation in Islahi’s commentary. For instance, Islahi denies that the Night Journey of the Prophet was simply a dream (khwab ke ma’ni mein lena kisi tarah sahih nahin hai, p. 475). Citing verse 60, Islahi implies that it was more than simply an event. For it was a vision:

We have ordained that the vision which We have shown thee. Furthermore, the image of tenderness in the command of verse 24 to:

spread over them humbly the wings of thy tenderness

is considered by Islahi to be a metaphorical expression (ista’are mein ye talmih muzmar hai, ibid, p. 496). Again, in the idiomatical expression of verse 29:

And neither allow thy hand to remain shackled to thy neck,

Islahi finds a reference to extreme miserliness (ta’bir hai intihai bukhil aur khissat ki, ibid, p. 498). Moreover, the “tree of hell” in verse 60 is a symbol that is meant to be a warning (ghaflat ke mate log mutanbih hon, ibid, p. 517) just as the phrase from verse 1: “He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing” is an expression of warning for the Quraysh and for the Israelites (mushrikin quraysh aur bani israil donon ko mutanbih karta hai, ibid. p. 476)

Finally, the parable in verses 66-69 can be applied to two kinds of people (do grohon ki tamsil, ibid, p. 521) but Islahi wants to apply the parable primarily to the Quraysh, who were the first to be addressed in it (jo quran ke mukhatab awal they, ibid). Yet he accepts that the parable may have a wider application because it is expressed in general terms (‘am alfaz mein farmai gayi hai, ibid). Islahi reasserts the need for people to listen to the voice of their human nature and to follow the dictates of their reason in order to be able to understand the message of the Qur’an (iman o hidayat ki rah ye hai ke insan apni fitrat ki sadaon par kan dhre aur apni ‘aql ki rahnunai ko qabul kare, ibid, p. 523). The encouragement to use one’s reason would seem to suggest the importance of further investigating the different ways the Qur’an makes use of language.

The way of God

The way that God does things (sunnat-i-ilaahi) and the nature and scope of a Prophet’s task in the world (itmam-i-hujjat) are concepts with which Islahi moves beyond the specific context he has been describing. Islahi derives these concepts from verses 15-16:
Whoever chooses to follow the right path, follows it but for his own good; and whoever goes astray, goes but astray to his own hurt; and no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another’s burden. Moreover, We would never chastise (any community for the wrong they may do) ere We have sent an apostle (to them). But when (this has been done, and) it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our last warning to those of its people who have lost themselves entirely in the pursuit of pleasures; and (if) they (continue to) act sinfully, the sentence (of doom) passed on the community takes effect, and We break it to smithereens.

God never punishes a nation before sending them a prophet who is able to provide them with all the evidence they need for faith. God always sends an Apostle before bringing destruction to a nation of evil doers (rasul itmam-i-hujjat ka akhri zariy’ah hota hai, ibid, p. 514. If a nation persists in wrongdoing, the prophet will depart from them and they will be punished (nabi ne hijrat farmai aur qaum ‘azab-i-ilahi ki grift mein a gayi hai, ibid, p. 489). But it is God who will decide when and how this will happen (allah . . . faislah farmayega, ibid, p. 542). Verse 46 expresses the “sealing of hearts” (khatm qalub, ibid, p. 509) is another aspect of “the way of God” that has already been discussed at length in Surah Al Baqarah (sunnat-i-ilahi ke har pahlu ki wazahat kar chuke hain, ibid).
Conclusions

Since Islahi views the present Surah in the light of his formulation of the theme about the victory of the Muslims and the defeat of the unbelievers, he finds similarities between the present Surah and the previous one (koi bunyadi farq nahin hai, ibid, p. 469). Without the perspective of this theme ('umud), however, the present Surah could be understood in many respects as quite different in subject matter to Surah An Nahl.

In his introduction, Islahi says that the present Surah differs from the previous Surah in that it addresses the Israelites explicitly. However, Surah Al Isra directs only a few verses to the Israelites. Islahi also says that the present Surah develops certain teachings similar to the Ten Commandments. It seems to me that many such details were already included in other Surahs. In other words, they are not peculiar to Surah Al Isra.

Although Islahi considers that verse 80 makes a clear reference to the migration (hijrah), and that it was revealed just prior to the migration, many other scholars are of the opinion that it was revealed three or four years before the migration. Furthermore, Islahi understands verse 60 as a reference to the imminent conquest of Mecca. Yet scholars say that the Surah was revealed at least eight years before the victory of Mecca. In similar fashion, Islahi finds many verses that refer to the transfer of the mandate for custodianship of the House of Prayer – an event that took place many years after these verses were revealed.

Islahi considers it to be obvious to anyone who reflects on this Surah that all its parts are interconnected in accordance with the predetermined central idea (ek ma'in 'umud ke tahi kis tarah is surah ki har kari dusri kari se mili hui hai, ibid, p. 472). He illustrates what he regards as an evident conclusion by showing repeatedly how the verses of the Surah support the main theme ('umud) of victory for the Muslims and defeat for the Quraysh. In the light of (is roshni mein) this theme ('umud), according to Islahi, the first verse of the Surah is not simply a reference to the Inviolable House of Worship but indicates that the custodianship of this sacred place has been entrusted to the Prophet himself.

Furthermore, in the light of the main theme ('umud) of the Surah, Islahi claims that the Night Journey of the Prophet has a special purpose, namely, to strengthen the Prophet by giving him a preview of what was actually
about to happen. Islahi has failed to mention the parallel verses (nazair) to the mi'raj that occur in Surah An Najin.

Consequently, it is in the light of the theme (‘umud) of the Surah that Islahi understands verses 80-81 to be not a simple instruction on prayer but a reference to the departure and arrival that was about to take place during the migration. Moreover, verse 83 does not refer to humanity in general but to the Quraysh in particular (al insan ka lafz agarche ‘am hai lekin yahan is se murad quraysh ke wohi ashrar o mufsidin hain, ibid, p. 533). Similarly, the parable in verses 66-69 is applied directly to the Quraysh, though it may have a wider application (‘am alfaz mein farmai gayi hai, ibid, p. 521). Furthermore, the “nine clear messages” of 101 must be understood in the light of the objections being raised by the Quraysh. Likewise, the story about Adam and the angels must be seen in the context (siyaq o sabaq kalam, ibid, p. 519) of the consolation and encouragement that was provided for the Prophet (tasalli di ja rahi hai, ibid). Islahi’s understanding of the theme (‘umud) has influenced his interpretation of all these verses.

In addition, Islahi adds his own personal reflections with regard to modern methods of family planning in his comment on verse 31, a verse that had no direct link with family planning when it was revealed. Likewise, Islahi takes the liberty to propose his own theories about adultery and about the nature of Islamic society and law (hamare nazdik mausyad qawanin islami qanun ki bahut si barkaton se khali hain, ibid, p. 501). Islahi proceeds to make further comments on society and civilization. In these sections of his commentary, Islahi has become an author presenting his own views.

Islahi prefers the “actual” meaning of the phrase: “and bear upon them with all thy horses and all thy men” in verse 64 (apne haqiqi ma’ni mein iste’mal hua hai, ibid, p. 525). The verse is not a metaphor but refers to what actually happened (mahz ista’rah hi nahn hai, balke amr wajhe’ bhi hai, ibid, p. 520). Islahi does not explain why such an expression could not be a metaphor in the way that other verses employ symbolic language.

Finally, Islahi stresses the need for readers of the Qur’an to listen to the voice of their human nature and to follow the dictates of reason in order to be able to understand the message of the Qur’an (apni ‘aql ki rahnumai ko qabul kare, ibid, p. 523). Islahi’s encouragement to use reason suggests the need for further investigation into new ways of understanding the Qur’an.
Surah *Al Kahf*

**Introduction**

At the beginning of his opening remarks to a discussion of this Surah, Islahi describes the historical context in which it was revealed, presents its main theme and mentions its link with the previous Surah (surah ka zamana nuzul, 'umud aur sabiq surah se ta'lluq, vol. 4, p. 551). He asserts that it was revealed when the struggle between truth and falsity at the time of the last Prophet was in its last stages. The Quraysh had become convinced that the beckoning voice of the Qur'an would soon be silenced forever (quran ki da'wat ko mita dene par tul gaye they, ibid), while the Jews and the Christians were siding with the Quraysh secretly in the hope that they themselves could avoid direct confrontation with the Muslims.

In view of this socio-political context in (halat ke taqaze se, ibid), the Surah highlights the following points. Firstly, a warning is given to the Quraysh to refrain from giving preference to their worldly pursuits while turning a deaf ear to the self-evident truth being proclaimed to them. God’s punishment is night. Secondly, the Prophet and his followers are encouraged to endure the oppression they are suffering since the migration is about to take place and they are told that certain (hitherto unknown) legal steps will soon be taken. Thirdly, Islahi makes the point that whereas, in the previous Surah (*Al Isra*), the real attitude of the Jews was exposed, in the present Surah (*Al Kahf*) and in the following one (Surah *Maryam*), the attitude taken by the Christians will similarly be exposed. All this is meant as a warning for the Quraysh.

Islahi says that one characteristic of the coherence of the Qur'an (nazm-i-quran ki is khususiyyat, ibid, p. 622) is to be found in the fact that a Surah usually ends with the topic on which it started (suraten bilu'mum is mazmun par khatm hoti hain jis mazmun se in ka aghaz hota hai, ibid). Surah *Al Kahf* provides an example of this characteristic (cf. ibid).

**The Appeal to Reason**

Islahi stresses the use of reason in his opening remarks. As verse 1 says:

All praise is due to God, who has bestowed this divine writ from on high upon His servant, and has not allowed any deviousness to obscure its meaning.
Islahi concludes that any reasonable person will be able to discern the signs of the straight path that God provides for all people (sirat mustaqim . . . ke mustaqim hone ke dalail ‘aql o fitrat aur afaq o anfus ke har goshe mein maujud hain aur quran ne in ko itne gonagon tariqon se bayan kar dia hai ke koi ‘aql ke kam lene wala in ke samajhne se qasar nahin rah sakta, ibid, p. 557).

Islahi emphasizes the point by saying that only those persons who do not make use of their reason can fail to recognize God’s signs (sirf wahi in se mahrum rahenge jo ‘aql se kam nahin le rahe hain, ibid) and says that the same message is contained in verse 9 of Al Isra: “Verily, this Qur’an shows the way to all that is most upright” (ibid).

According to Islahi, verse 7 affirms the ability of human reason and discernment:

Behold, We have willed that all beauty on earth be a means by which We put men to a test, (showing) which of them are best in conduct.

Mankind has the ability to deal with the test of endurance that God has ordained for all people (is mein ham ye dekh rahe hain ke kaun apni ‘aql o tamyez se kam le kar akhirat ka talib banta hai, ibid, p. 558). In fact, no one can face the Last Day successfully if he is careless about what his own heart tells him (wo log jinhone apni ‘aql o dil ke angken andhi kar li hain, ibid, p. 599).

The same rational approach is discernible in Islahi’s comment on verse 44:

For thus it is: all protective power belongs to God alone, the True One. He is the best to grant recompense, and the best to determine what is to be.

Islahi says that God punishes, either in this world or the next, in order to provide justice for the virtuous. The logical consequence of this is to punish the evil-doers (‘azab-i-dunya ho ya ‘azab-i-akhirat is se asal maqsud nekon ki dadrasi hai. badon ko saza dena is ka asal maqsud nahin balke lazmi natiqa hai, ibid, p. 588). In other words, although Islahi frequently points out that the message of punishment for unbelief is couched in the language of warning and threat, he also makes a rational argument about the logical need for recompense and punishment in order to bolster his concept of the thematic coherence of the Qur’an.
The language of warning is evident, for instance, in verses 50-59, in which God consoles the Prophet by reminding him that his responsibility is solely to warn and not to bring punishment (peghambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko tasalli di ke rasul ka kam 'azab lana nahin hota balke sirf inzar o tabshir hota hai, ibid, p. 592). Even though the message should be clear to any rational person, the Prophet is told to wait for the completion or perfection of the arguments which will be accomplished in God’s own time (ab in ka ma’mlah allah ke hawale karo aur sabr ke sath apne kam mein lage raho ta ke in par achhi tarah hujjat tamam ho jaye, ibid, p. 598).

The Social Context

Islahi finds a resemblance between the story of the cave and the difficulties the Prophet and his companions were facing in Mecca and says that, just as the men found shelter in the cave, so the Prophet and his companions took shelter in a cave during their migratory journey to Ethiopia and to Medina (jis tarah ashab-i-kahf apne mahaul mein hadif-i-mazalim bane they isi tarah anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ke sahaba bhi quraysh ke mazalim ke hadaf they aur jis tarah ashab-i-kahf ko ghar mein panah leni pari isi tarah ap aur ap ke sahaba ke samne bhi hijrat habasha, ghar-i-saur aur hijrat medina ke marahil ane wale they, ibid, p. 561). The story is thus an image of what actually happened to the Prophet and his companions, providing them with a lesson in dealing with their difficult experiences in Mecca just prior to the migration (nihayat sabaq amuz ho sakti thi y is liye ke ap aur ap ke sahaba inhi marahil se guzar rahe they jin se ashab-i-kahf ko guzarna para tha, ibid, p. 560). In short, Islahi applies the parable of the men in the cave to the specific event of the migration.

Islahi introduces the group of verses 9-26, which include the story of the men in the cave, with a discussion about the addressee for verse 9:

dost thou (really) think that (the parable of ) the Men of the Cave and of (their devotion to) the scriptures could be deemed more wondrous than any (other) of Our messages?

Islahi says that the pronoun “thou” does not necessarily refer to the Prophet but could refer to the individuals of a group or to the group itself for the sake of emphasis (khitab zaruri nahin ke anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam hi se ho balke “a lam tara” ke khitab ki tarah
Islahi does not substantiate his claim that the story of the men in the cave originated in Christian history (nisara apni tarikh ke ibtidai daur mein, ibid) but he does make assertions about Christianity as a background to the story. This enables him to suggest the reason why the story appears in the Surah (cf. ibid, p. 561). Islahi claims that the question in verse 9 refers to the claim the Jews and the Christians were making that their religion was better than the new religion of the Prophet (sawal utane walon ki is pas pardaah zahaniyat ko samne rakh kar, ibid). According to Islahi, the Surah stresses that the wonderful story of the men in the cave is only one of so many of God’s great signs and that no one group has a monopoly of these signs (in par kisi khas groh ka ajarah nahn hai, ibid, p. 567).

The story is thus a reminder to the young people who were joining the new group of believers that they should take courage from the story of the men in the cave and not lose heart at the hostility of their contemporaries (iman lane wale nau jawanon ko tawaja dala di ke wo is sar gusasht se sabaq hasil karen, ibid, p. 569). It is clear that Islahi sees the story as a response to the polemical questions that were being raised during the time of revelation.

Islahi also sets the last part of verse 21 in the polemical context of the Jews, Christians and the Muslims of the period (cf. ibid, p. 575). The second part of the verse reads:

And so, some (people) said: “Erect a building in their memory; God knows best what happened to them.” Said they whose opinion prevailed in the end: “Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory!

According to Islahi, these words refer to the building of mosques since the Jews and the Christians originally worshipped in mosques (yahud aur nisara ke ‘ibadat khane aslan masjid hi they, ibid). The reference to houses of worship in verse 21 does not refer to mosques in the narrow sense of the word, however, but rather in the wider sense of a mosque as a place for prayer.

It is interesting how Islahi situates verse 28 in its social context:
And contain thyself in patience by the side of all who at morn and at evening invoke their Sustainer, seeking His countenance, and let not thine eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of this world's life; and pay no heed to any whose heart We have rendered heedless of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed (only) his own desires, abandoning all that is good and true.

Islahi says the verse is directed to the Prophet who was neglecting his companions and turning his attention to the rich and the powerful (apni qaum ke sardaron aur maldaron, ibid, p. 581). Islahi adds that the Prophet was not really interested in their wealth and power but only in promoting religion (sirf din ki sar bulandi ki khatr, ibid) because the Prophet hoped the rich and the powerful would open the way for others to come to faith (dusron ke iman ki rah kolega, ibid). However, the Prophet is told to give more attention to the believers. Islahi concludes by expecting scholars of Arabic to understand that the verse is aimed, not at the Prophet, but at the proud and the wealthy (mutakbarin aur aghniya ki taraf hai, ibid), who looked down on the companions of the Prophet (jo sahaba ko haqir samajhte, ibid) and who promised to listen to him provided the Prophet was prepared to distance himself from these people whom they considered to be inferior (cf. ibid).

Accordingly, verses 30-31 are directed to these very companions, who were considered of low esteem by the wealthy, promising them a reward of a kind they would understand in their own social context (is wajh se in ke sulah ke bayan mein in chizon ko khas taur par numayan kiya gaya hai jo waqt ke amara ke liye sarmaya fakhr o naz thiy, ibid, p. 582). In other words, the social background explains why the verse uses words like gold, garments of silk and brocade in order to describe the reward the companions could expect in heaven.

Similarly, the social context of verse 46 is significant:

Wealth and children are an adornment of this world's life: but good deeds, the fruit whereof endures forever, are of far greater merit in thy Sustainer's sight, and a far better source of hope.

Islahi says the language of the verse mirrors the values of Arabic society, which highly esteemed those with offspring (wo apni bahami mufakharat ki majlis mein kasrat-i-aulad ka zikr khas taur par
Likewise, Islahi supplies the cultural background for verse 50, which speaks of iblis as “one of those invisible beings”, saying that Arab unbelievers worshipped these invisible beings in various forms (mushrikin ‘arab jinnat ko mukhtalif shaklon mein puje the, ibid, p. 596). Islahi describes the way these Arabs were ready even to sacrifice their children in order to avoid reprisals by these invisible beings (cf. ibid). Thus, the social and cultural background is also significant for Islahi.

Although verse 54 speaks of all mankind:

Thus, indeed, have We given in this Qur’an many facets to every kind of lesson (designed) for (the benefit of) mankind, Islahi restricts the scope of the word for “mankind” (an nas) to the context of the unbelieving Arabs described in these verses (insan se wohi jagralo mukhaib hain jin se yahan baks chal rahi hai, ibid, p. 597). Likewise, in verse 55, there is a general reference to all people in the opening question:

What is there to keep people from attaining to faith?

Islahi says the context of these verses will explain the reference to “all people” (“an nas” se murad yahan bhi wohi log hain jin se baks chal rahi hai, ibid). This illustrates the way Islahi sets the Surah in a specific context.

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi seems to move between seeing certain verses in terms of symbolic expression and others in a prima facie manner. For instance, Islahi provides a metaphorical explanation of the extremely long period that the men spent in the cave by saying that God gave them a restful sleep (nihayat aram o sakun ki nind tari ki di, ibid, p. 568). Islahi seems to accept the version commonly accepted by the classical scholars that God “veiled their ears with sleep”

108 This statement is misleading because the Arabs never worshipped iblis.
109 The Arabs never sacrificed their children, however. The Qur’an, the hadith and the books of history all attest to this fact. Islahi does not provide any evidence to support his assertion.
110 See, for example, Asad (1980), p. 440, note 9.
many signs or symbols provided by God for the benefit of mankind 
(apne bandon ke liye ek aisa ghar muhiya farma dia, ibid, p. 571) by
means of which God provided for all their needs (in ke liye sari
zaruriyat-i-zindagi farahim thi, ibid). However, by all mankind
(apne bandon), Islahi may well have in mind only those believers who
were living at the time of revelation.

On the other hand, Islahi seems to abandon the symbolic or figurative
character of the story by analyzing such phrases about turning over in
one’s sleep in verse 18:

And We caused them to turn over repeatedly, now to the right,
now to the left
in terms of biological necessity (ye karvat saihat jasmani ko baryar
rakhne ke liye zaruri hai, ibid, p. 572). Islahi even understands the
dog, mentioned in the same verse, as fulfilling a specific function,
thereby losing the overall symbolic nature of the story (cf. ibid).
Islahi applies the story to the conflicts and debates that were going on
at the time of revelation (zahir hai ke ye tanaz’a mukhtalif grohon,
firqon aur khandanon mein waqe’ hua hoga, ibid, p. 575),
understanding the story in terms of the arguments that were going on
between the Muslims, the Jews and the Christians. In one particular
argument, the Muslims won the day (masjid ta’mir karne ka faislah
kiya aur yahi rahe ghalib rahe, ibid).

Similarly, the last verses of the Surah (verses 99-110) speak of the
way punishment will finally come. As verse 99 says:

And on that Day We shall (call forth all mankind and) leave
them to surge like waves (that dash) against one another; and
the trumpet (of judgment) will be blown, and We shall gather
them all together.

Islahi recognizes the figurative language used in this verse (ye baten
agarcheh mutashabahat ki nau’yat ki hain, ibid, p. 625), but claims
that even modern science cannot prevent such occurrences from
happening on the Last Day (cf. ibid). In other words, the events
described in this verse are going to happen in some kind of material or
physical sense as well. Likewise, verse 109 expresses the extent and
majesty of God’s messages:

Say: “If all the sea were ink for my Sustainer’s words, the sea
would indeed be exhausted ere my Sustainer’s words are
exhausted! And (thus it would be) if we were to add to it sea
upon sea.”
Yet Islahi says that the verse does not resort to exaggeration and prefers to accept the language according to its *prima facie* meaning (ye serta sar bayan-i-haqiqat hai. *is mein zara barabar bhi mubalagha nahin hai,* ibid, p. 626). Islahi wants to include the figurative language of the Qur’an in the category of logical reason.

Furthermore, Islahi seems to be well aware of the fact that, when the Qur’an uses parables, it uses language and concepts that are part of the contemporary culture (*quran in chizon ke bayan mein ahl ‘arab hi ki ma’lumat aur inhi ke zaq ko malhuz rakhia hai is liye ke tashbih aur tamsil mein mu’assir wohi chizen hoti hain jin se mukhatah waqif hon,* ibid, p. 582). Consequently, the language of these parables must be understood according to the way those to whom they were first addressed understood them, without thereby exhausting their meaning. For example, the parable of the two men, in verses 32-33, narrates that one of them owned two vineyards. Islahi says that the garden described in this parable fits with the image of a perfect garden common among the Arabs (*ahl ‘arab ke nazdik behterin bagh ka tasawwur,* ibid, p. 585). Naturally, the purpose of the story is not to describe a perfect garden but to provide a symbol of prosperity and fruitfulness that would not have been missed by those to whom it was addressed.

However, instead of inquiring into the symbolic nature of the parable of Moses and his quest for knowledge narrated in verses 60-82, Islahi begins by providing his own reasoned opinions as to the meaning of the parable under three headings (cf. ibid, p. 599). He also states his own opinion as to the meaning of phrases such as “the junction of the two seas”, saying it is a reference to a specific place (“*majmu’ albahrain*” *se murad ghalban khalija ‘aqaba aur suez ka wo maqam ittisal hai,* ibid, p. 604). Islahi adds his own details to the story by saying that Moses and his servant were having breakfast (*nashta kar ke,* ibid, p. 605) and that the fish they were going to eat was roasted (*machli buni hui thiy,* ibid). These examples indicate that Islahi is sometimes more concerned about establishing factual information than he is about the symbolic nature of the story.

At the end of his comments on the story, Islahi draws some very general conclusions. He says that the story instructs believers to be patient in adversity (*ahl iman ko chahiye ke wo is par sabr karen,*
ibid, p. 609). Islahi simply says that the parable is an example of something that generally happens in the world (ye misal hai, ibid, p. 610). In short, Islahi sees the parable in the light of the social conditions prevailing at the time of revelation. At the same time, he draws a conclusion that goes beyond that specific context.

After saying that many former commentators have discussed the historical identity of the “Two-Horned One” (verses 83-98), Islahi proceeds to consider various possible figures taken from history (tarikh ki roshni mein bhi sabut hain, ibid, p. 612). He quotes passages from Isaiah and from Daniel without showing due care for the original context of these quotations (cf. ibid, p. 613). Eventually, Islahi opts for Cyrus as a possible identity for this figure, suggesting all kinds of geographical explanations (cf. ibid, p. 617) for the references in verse 86:

(And he marched westwards) till, when he came to the setting of the sun, it appeared to him that it was setting in a dark, turbid sea.

Islahi provides further geographical information to explain verses 92-98, mentioning by name: the Caspian Sea, Mongolia, Iran, Turkistan and Caucasia (ibid, pp. 620-621). Islahi finds it necessary to confirm his description of the “Two-Horned One” by historical references (tarikhon se bhi is bat ki taid o tasdiq hoti hai, ibid, p. 619). But he makes no distinction between Scriptural and non-Scriptural or secular history, drawing freely from these two different kinds of historical writing.

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111 It was Maulana Kalam Azad who first suggested that the “Two-Horned One” was a reference to Cyrus.

112 According to Muhammad Asad, the Two-Horned One “has nothing to do with history or even legend, and that its sole purport is a parabolic discourse on faith and ethics, with specific reference to the problem of worldly power”. Asad (1980), p. 452, footnote 81.
Conclusions

Disregarding the evidence in the Sirah, in the Hadith and in former commentaries on the Qur’an (tafasir), which relate the occasion of revelation for the story of the cave in this Surah, Islahi connects the story with the period in which the Quraysh were oppressing the Muslims. In this way, the story becomes a warning for the Quraysh. However, the Quraysh were not acquainted with this story and there would have been better ways of warning them.

Furthermore, Islahi says the story is an image of what actually happened to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions (ap aur ap ke sahaba inhi marahil se guzar rahey they, ibid, p. 560). It should be remembered, however, that only the Prophet and one companion, Abu Bakr, temporarily sheltered in a cave during the migration (hijrah) – an event that happened five years after the story was revealed. Therefore, the story could not have been understood as an image of their future experience.

In his introduction, Islahi says that the real attitude of the Jews was exposed in Surah Al Isra. He argues that, subsequently, in Surah Al Kahf and in Surah Maryam the behaviour of the Christians will be exposed in a similar way. Islahi has put the chronology of revelation back to front. These Surahs were revealed in the following order: Maryam, Al Kahf, Al Isra. Islahi disregards the fact that Surah Maryam was revealed before the other Surahs. Moreover, it is incorrect to say that a particular Surah refers to the Jews as a separate group and to the Christians as another separate group. Surah Al Isra (also named Bani Israil) is clearly concerned with both the Jews and the Christians, who were the Bani Israil.

Islahi appeals to reason (‘aql) to provide confirmation for his formulation of the theme (‘umud) of the Surah. Islahi is confident that any reasonable person is able to endure the trials of life provided the person uses his reason (koi ‘aql lene wala, ibid, p. 557) and he appeals to rational argument to show how reward and punishment are simply the logical consequence of one’s behaviour in the world. Other concepts, like sunnat-i-ilahi and itmam hujjat are not explained in the same rational manner.
While Islahi seems to understand the story of the men in the cave in a symbolic way, Islahi also seems to abandon the symbolic or figurative character of the story by his description of the way the men slept and by his explanation of the function of their dog. Islahi is sometimes more concerned about establishing factual information than he is about the symbolic nature of the story. He concludes that the story reflects the conflicts and debates that were going on between the Muslims, Jews and Christians of that time (zahir hai ke ye tanaz' mukhtalif grohon, firgon aur khandanon mein waqi'ah hua hoga, ibid, p. 575). The story, therefore, depends for its meaning on its connection with actual events. This is another example of the way external evidence is needed to understand the Qur'an. In Surah Group Four, Islahi categorically rejects such external evidence.

Islahi says that verse 28 describes how the Prophet (peace be upon him) approached the wealthy and the powerful so that they would believe. Since Arabs were more impressed with descriptions of gold and garments of silk and brocade, the Surah uses these categories to communicate with them. Similarly, Islahi says that the language of verse 46 mirrors the values of Arabic society as it existed in that period and that verse 50 expresses the cultural background of society at that time. These values and symbols, however, do not exist only in Arabic society but have a wider connotation. Islahi fails to highlight this more universal dimension.

Commenting on the parable of Moses related in verses 60-82, Islahi adds his own reflections and simply concludes that the story instructs believers to be patient in adversity (sabr karen, ibid, p. 609). Islahi totally disregards the esoteric meaning of the story provided by the Surah itself in verses 78-82. Islahi misses the meaning of the parable by referring to it as just an example of things that happen in the world (ye misal hai, ibid, p. 610). On the other hand, Islahi takes pains to supply many historical references and much geographical information in order to explain the narrative about the “Two-horned One” in verses 83-98.

In short, Islahi’s approach to the parables is inconsistent because he recognizes some verses as figurative expressions (mutashabahat ki nau'vat ke hain, ibid, p. 625) while, at the same time, understanding many of the parables in their prima facie or material sense (ye sarta
sar bayan-i-haqiqat hai. is mein zara barabar bhi mubalagha nahin hai, ibid, p. 626).
Surah Maryam

Introduction

This Surah forms the second of a pair with the previous one. Islahi says there is no essential difference in theme ('umud) between the two Surahs, only a difference in the flow of thought and style of expression (tariq-i-istadlal aur naih bayon mein faraq hai, vol. 4, p. 629). Islahi says that those who lived during the time of the earlier Prophets failed to live their lives according to the dictates of monotheism required of them by the original din (asl din ki da'wat, ibid). In the present age (the time of revelation), there are people who are opposing the same message presented by the last Prophet. The Surah invites the Prophet to be patient and to trust in the eventual overthrow of his opponents, whose fault consists in their misplaced trust in worldly power and accomplishment (apni dunwi kamyabiyon ko apne barhaq hone ki dhil samajhte hain, ibid). Far from justifying their behavior, worldly success should be understood as a respite (dhil) granted by God to enable his purposes to be accomplished (khuda ki taraf se in ke liye dhil hai ke khuda ki hujjat in par puri ho jaye, ibid).

The Socio-political Context

Islahi describes the context (khas mauqa' o mahal, ibid, p. 674) for this Surah as one of encouragement for the Prophet (sabr o istiqamat ki talqin, ibid) in the struggle between truth and falsity (haq o batil ki kashmakash, ibid). Dependent solely on the guidance he receives through revelation, the Prophet has to fortify the Muslim soldiers engaged at the war front (jo mujahid dushmanon ki dal ba dal fauj ke muqabil mein muhaz par ho is ko markaz se rahnumai ka intizar har waqt rahta tha, ibid). So God promises to provide him with the needed guidance at the appropriate time (jis rahnumai aur madad ki zarurat hogi wo apne waqt par allah nazil farmaega, ibid). This is the situation in which verse 64 was revealed:

And (the angels say): “We do not descend (with revelation), again and again, other than by thy Sustainer’s command: unto Him belongs all that lies open before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in-between. And never does thy Sustainer forget (anything).”

Islahi describes the socio-political context in some detail. He argues that mention is made in this Surah of Jesus and Mary because the Christians were, at this time, giving secret support to the Quraysh (cf. ibid, p. 629).
Islahi is referring here to the covert political support the Christians were providing for the Quraysh in their struggle with the Muslims, just as the Jews were already doing (yahud ke tarah nisara ne bhi darpardah quraysh ki pushtpanahi sharu' kar di thi, ibid). Such support from the People of the Book was a great boon for the Quraysh because of the esteem in which the People of the Book were held among the Arabs, who were illiterate (ummi hone ke sabab se, ibid). The fact that the Qur’an attempts to nullify the influence that the People of the Book were having on the Quraysh only goes to show the extent of their influence (quran ne ahl kitab ke is asr ko batil karne ke liye in ki haqiqat wazeh ki, ibid). Furthermore, the present Surah discredits the Christians, just as one of the previous Surahs (Al Isra or Bani Israil) had totally discredited the Jews {bani israil mein yahud ka bilkul be bunyad hona wazeh kiya, aur is surah mein bilkul isi andaz mein nisara ki be sabati dikhai hai, p. 629-630). Islahi says that the purpose of these revelations is to convince the Quraysh that there was no point in relying on people whose lives were not based on strong foundations (jin ki apni koi bunyad nahin hai, p. 630).

The political alliance Islahi refers to in his introduction is not described in the Surah as such. In fact, it is difficult to see how the Christians could have formed a solid front with the Quraysh against the Muslims since, as Islahi himself says, the Christians were so divided among themselves (nisara ke bahmi ikhtilafat, p. 650). However, the fact that they concealed the truth about the Prophets Abraham and Ishmael is further proof that the Jews were hostile to Islam (islam dushmani ke josh, ibid, p. 666). In fact, all the Jews and Christians are dismissed as a group together with the unbelievers because they did not obey the basic commandments, just as previous Surahs had shown (yahud o nisara aur mushrikin ne din ke is bunyadi hukm ke sath jo ma’amlah kiya is ki tafsil surah baqarah, ahl ‘imran, aur an’am waghera mein guzar chuki hai, ibid, p. 668). Islahi even seems to imply that the Jews destroyed their religion (jinhone khuda ka sara din to taraj kar ke rakh dia tha, ibid, p. 669). In all these instances, Islahi portrays the Jews and the Christians in a negative light so that his theory about their political alliance with the Quraysh would appear more plausible.

In several places in his commentary, Islahi asserts that the Qur’an is not dependent on external material for it to be understood. Yet Islahi also makes frequent reference to Arabic traditions and customs in order to throw light
on the Qur'an. Moreover, verse 46 of this Surah records the threat of Abraham’s father towards him:

I shall most certainly cause thee to be stoned to death!

Islahi finds it helpful to provide the background for this verse by describing the Arabic custom according to which certain people had unlimited authority or power over their subjects (ve amr yahan milhuz rahe ke qabaili zindagi mein . . . bapon ko apne baiton aur baition par bilkul ghair mahdud ikhtiyarat hasil they, ibid, p. 660). The verse should be understood in the light of this cultural background. Instead of restricting himself to the Arabic cultural background, however, Islahi should have provided the reader with some guidance on how to interpret this verse in a more universal way.

Similarly, from the context of the word for “man” in verse 66, it is quite clear (qarina dalil hai, ibid, p. 676) that specific Arab unbelievers (mushrikin ‘arab, ibid) are being addressed:

With all this, man (often) says, ‘What! Once I am dead, shall I again be brought forth alive?’

Islahi says it was inappropriate to address them directly because they denied any form of life after death (goya wo laiq ilitfat nahin is wajh se ‘am sigha se bat kah di gayi, ibid). Islahi goes on to describe the common understanding and beliefs of the Arab people because he says such information is important for understanding the text of the Surah (mushrikin ke in mutanaqaz khayalat ko samne rakhe tab quran ke age ke mabhas samaj mein ayenge, ibid).

Furthermore, the context for the word “satanic forces” in verse 68 is understood by Islahi in a similar way (qarina dalil hai, ibid, p. 677) to refer to the leaders of the Quraysh (gumrah lidaron, ibid). The same verse describes those condemned to hell as squatting “on their knees, around hell”. Islahi explains how criminals of that period had to squat while waiting for their superiors to decide their fate (jis tarah mujrim apna faislah sunane ke liye kisi hukmran ke samne baitate hain, ibid). Those perverse leaders of the Quraysh, together with those who listened to their words, will be waiting around hell in the same way on judgment day. Islahi sees the verse as

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113 Cf. Islahi’s comment on verse 1 of Surah Al Furuq, vol. 5, p. 443. Islahi also makes frequent use of external sources by referring to books of traditions (riwayat) in Surah AlAzab.
114 Pre-Islamic poetry makes specific reference to life after death. It does not seem correct to assert that the Arabs did not believe in an after-life.
115 Islahi does not provide any evidence for his view that criminals of that period had to squat while awaiting their verdict.
highlighting the ‘umud of the Surah, which is the eventual defeat of the Quraysh.

Transcending the Specific Context

Verses with a specific addressee or verses understood in a particular context are, however, given general applications. For example, verse 13 describes the qualities of John, but Islahi understands these qualities as belonging to all people (ye na ho to insan insan nahin balke patar ki ek murat hai, ibid, p. 639). Similarly, verses 47-48 contain the reply of the Prophet Abraham to his father, but Islahi draws general conclusions meant for all people (jab tak admi mom ki tarah narm aur patar ki tarah sakhat na ho wo haq ki koi kidmat injam nahin de sakta, ibid, p. 661).

Sometimes, Islahi moves in the opposite direction, that is, a word with a general connotation is considered to have a particular meaning. For example, in verse 66:

With all this, man (often) says, “What! Once I am dead, shall I again be brought forth alive?”

Islahi says the word for “man” refers specifically to Arab unbelievers rather than to human beings in general (yahan lafz ‘insan’ agarcheh ‘am hai lekin qarina dalil hai ke is se murad mushrikin ‘arab hi hain, ibid, p. 676). He restricts the word even further when he applies it to the upper classes (amra o aghniya, ibid) and the corrupt leaders (gumrah lidaron, ibid, p. 677) of Arab society. Similarly, Islahi restricts the scope of the pronoun “you” of verse 71:

And every one of you will come within sight of it.

The majority of commentators understood this pronoun to include all human beings, sinners and righteous alike, but Islahi says that the word applies in a specific way to the sinners spoken of in the preceding verses (in mujrimon ko khitab kar ke farmayega ke ab . . . tum mein se bila istasna har ek ko is jahanam mein utarna hai, ibid, p. 678). In fact, Islahi is regularly restricting the meaning of words that could have a wider connotation and making them apply to the Quraysh.

Islahi’s perception of society leads him to dichotomize between two groups of people, the virtuous and the non-virtuous. He views society in terms of a polarization between “people immersed in the world” (dunya ke paristar,

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ibid, p. 681) and “believing people” (bandah mumin, ibid). He divides society into the oppressors (zalimon, ibid, p. 679) and the God-fearing people (ahl taqwa, and ahl haq, ibid). It is a short step from such categorization to further labels of contempt as can be found in his reference to “the stupidity of the unbelievers” (mushriqin ‘arab ki hamaqat, ibid, p. 675) or to “foolish people” (bewaquf logon, ibid).

Different Kinds of Language

Verse 72 has a reference to the way evildoers will be present in hell:

And once again: We shall save (from hell) those who have been conscious of Us; but We shall leave in it the evildoers, on their knees. Islahi’s material or physical way of understanding the verse leads him to suggest the need for special guardians or inspectors, whose job it will be to force these sinners to take up a crouching position while they wait for the doors of hell to open up. Since Islahi has taken these verses to describe an actual state of affairs rather than as a metaphor to express a strong warning of future suffering, Islahi leaves the reader with the image of a God who has abandoned his own people (allah ta’ala in ko dozakh ke darogon ke hawalah kar ke isi halat mein chaar kar in se iltefat hojayega, ibid, p. 677).

Islahi acknowledges that words are used in various ways in the Surah. For instance, the words from verse 65: “Worship, then, Him alone” is used in its widest sense (apne wasi’ mafhum, ibid, p. 676). He says the same word is used again in its widest meaning in Surah Al Fatihah (is lafs hi ye haqiqat, ibid) and in verse 44 of the present Surah (cf. ibid). Furthermore, Islahi says there are two meanings for the word “the right hand” from the following phrase in verse 52:

And (remember how) We called upon him from the right-hand slope of Mount Sinai.

Islahi prefers the more abstract connotation of “blessedness” after a study of Qur’anic parallels (quran ke nazair se, ibid, p. 663).

Moreover, in verse 25, Mary is told to “shake the trunk of the palm-tree”. Islahi says that Mary could not have done this without the special help of God (warna zahir hai ke in ki quwwat-i-bazu itni kahan ke wo kajar ke drakhat ko hila den, ibid, p. 646). Islahi takes the phrase in its physical, material or prima facie meaning, according to which Mary did shake the
trunk of the palm tree with the special help of God. I Islahi also understands verse 90 in its prima facie sense:

whereat the heavens might well-nigh be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins!

Islahi insists that this is not an exaggerated style of language but is an expression of factual reality (ye amr wazeh rahe ke ye koi mubalagha ka uslub-i-bayan nahin hai balke ek haqiqat ka bayou hai, ibid, p. 686). In other words, the words must be taken at their face value. We have already seen that Islahi's comments on verse 68, in which unbelievers are described as squatting around hell while waiting for judgment to be pronounced on them, indicates that Islahi understands this verse as a factual expression of reality (sab ko jahanam ke ird gird is tarah ikata karenge ke wo mujrimon ki tarah duzano baite hue apne faislah ka intizar karenge, ibid, p. 677). The words describe an actual situation.

Islahi provides a further example of his approach to language in his discussion of verse 71 of Surah Maryam:

And every one of you will come with sight of it: this is, with thy Sustainer, a decree that must be fulfilled.

Islahi struggles to reconcile this verse with verses 101-102 of Surah Al Anbiya, which seem to say the opposite of the verse just quoted:

these will be kept far away from that (hell): no sound thereof will they hear; and they will abide in all that their souls have ever desired.

Islahi’s solution is that, since (in Surah Al Anbiya) God promises the virtuous that they will be kept far from hell, verse 71 of Surah Maryam must be understood in a more specific way as applying only to the non-virtuous. Former commentators have wrongly applied the verse to everyone (hamare mufassarin ne is ka mukhatab tamam bani nau insan ko man liya hai, ibid, p. 678). These commentators have even devised the notion of a special bridge so that the virtuous can safely cross over hell on their way to heaven (jahanam par pul sirat ke nam se ek pul hoga jis par se nek log to guzar jayenge, ibid). But Islahi says that these commentators have misunderstood the characteristic style of the Qur’an (uslub kalam ke na samajne ke sabab se hui hai, ibid). Islahi does not give any further explanation of this particular Qur’anic style, but refers the reader to a book on the subject written by his teacher, Maulana Farahi (cf. ibid, p. 679).

117 Since palm trees in Arabia do not grow tall, however, Mary would not have needed the special help of God to shake the trunk of the palm tree.
Islahi is confronted with a similar problem in the next verse where he is compelled to find a way out of the difficulty presented by a literal interpretation of Maryam, verse 72:

And once again: We shall save (from hell) those who have been conscious of Us.

Islahi wonders why the virtuous need to be saved from hell since there is no danger at all that they would be sent there. He solves the problem by saying that, in this verse, God saves the virtuous from their worries and troubles (najat dene se murad in tamam humum o afkar aur is tashwish o intizar se najat, ibid, p. 679). Hence, ultimately, Islahi has been forced to accept a more figurative or metaphorical meaning for the reality of hell. The reader is left with the question as to whether the Qur'an understands hell simply as a metaphor.

Former Scriptures

Islahi says (cf. ibid, p. 643) that the “divine writ”, mentioned in verse 16, refers to the Gospel:

And call to mind, through this divine writ, Mary. Lo! She withdrew from her family to an eastern place.

Since he claims to have dealt with these references in his discussion of Surah Al 'Imran, Islahi now limits himself to a clarification simply of the context of these verses (yahan ham sirf ayat ke siyaq o sabaq ki wazahat ki had tak bahs ko mahdud rakhenge, ibid). Since it is not clear whether the context is the same from one Surah to the next, there is a question about the legitimacy of comparing a verse from one context with that from another. Islahi does not deal adequately with this problem in his use of “parallel verses” in the Qur'an (quran ke nazair, p. 663).

Islahi’s ambivalent approach to the former Scriptures becomes apparent in that he agrees with the information provided by the Gospels that Bethlehem is the place referred to in verse 22: “she withdrew with him to a far-off place” (cf. ibid, p. 645) but he rejects in the present Surah (and in Surah Al 'Imran and in Surah Al Maidah) what he calls a certain Pauline mythology (cf. ibid, p. 648). Islahi also makes a passing remark about the way certain traditions were included in the Gospels to support a particular viewpoint (jab hazrat masih par da‘we aluhiyat ki tuhmat chapkai gayi hai to is ki tayid farahim karne ke liye is qism ki riwayat bhi injilon mein dakhal kar di gayi, ibid, p. 649). But Islahi does not develop these observations about the formation of the Gospels. He only refers to the way traditions came to be
changed and corrupted in the process of transmission (ba’d ke naskhon se ika zikr ghaib ho gaya ho, ibid, p. 666). Islahi refers to these changes to explain why he found no satisfactory clarifications about the Prophet in Bible history (bible history mein koi aisi chiz muje nahin mil saki, ibid).

The Way of God

Islahi has a particular way of understanding of “the way of God” (sunat-ilahi, ibid, p. 680). The Qur’an says that God warns people and tries to raise their awareness by prolonging their lives on earth through an extension of their life span (in ko ziyadah se ziyadah dhil de ta ke wo apna peman: achhi tarah bar len aur khuda ki hujjat in par tamam ho jaye, ibid). Islahi tries to clarify this concept of “extension of time” by stressing that it is totally in the power of God to grant such an extension or not (ya’ni zalimon ko anil khuda ki qudrat, hikmat aur is ki tadbir ka muqtasa hai, ibid). Those who refuse to pay attention to the warnings given by God have to take the consequences of their refusal by experiencing various kinds of agony in this world and in the next (ye ‘angarib apni is gumrahi ke anjam se duchar honge, ibid p. 667).

But Islahi does not clarify the kind of suffering or punishment that will come in his world as distinct from the punishment one can expect in the next, according to the phrase from verse 75: “suffering (in this world or (at the coming of) the Last Hour” (ek se ‘azab dunya murad ho fa hai aur dusre se ‘a: ab-i-qayamat, ibid, p. 680). Islahi says the task of the Prophet is simply to convey good news of success and happiness to those who fear God (jin ke at dar khauf-i-khuda hai in ko faitz ofalah id khush khabari suna do, ibid, p. 690). As for the unbelievers, the Prophet is told to warn them of suffering in this world and in the next (dunya aur akhvat donon ke ‘azab se khabardar kar do, ibid). But he does not explain how success and happiness for the virtuous and punishment for the unbelievers will take place in this world except in terms of the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims.

Moreover, Islahi refrains from entering into any discussion of the “bond with the Most Gracious”, mentioned in verse 87, a bond that could provide even great sinners with the hope of forgiveness. Islahi also rejects the possibility of any kind of intercession, in the way the Jews conceived of it (yahud ki tarah, ibid, p. 685), which this verse seems to grant to the Prophets on judgment day (quran ki roshni mein is khush fahami ke liye koi gunjaish nahn hai, ibid).
The Image of God

Islahi says the Qur’an presents the correct image of a God who is just, whose mercy does not negate his justice (is ki rahmat is ki ‘adl ko batil nahin karti balke is ka ‘adl bhi is ki rahmat hi ka muqtaza hai, ibid, p. 688). The Qur’anic concept of God’s justice corrects the faulty notions prevalent in other religions. Hence, it takes Islahi only one sentence to dismiss the Christian doctrine of atonement (gunahon ka kafara, ibid, p. 688). Next, Islahi points out the Jewish error (yahud ki gumrahi, ibid), according to which the Jews shelter behind a false concept of the merciful God (khuda ki rahmaniyat hi ki ar li thi, ibid). Finally, Islahi totally rejects the false ideas of the unbelieving Arabs, who rely on various deities to intercede for them with the Almighty.

The justice of God requires that he redress the grievances of those who are afflicted and punish the wrongdoers (is rahmat ka lazmi taqaza ye hai ke wo haq pariston ki dad rasi kare aur in ki haq parasti ka bar pur sulah de aur zalimon nahanjaron ko jahanam mein jhonk de, ibid). Islahi concludes that all the warnings as well as the good tidings contained in this Surah are an expression of the mercy of God (khuda ki sifat rahmaniyat par mabni hai, ibid, p. 689). Earlier, Islahi had said that the unity of God is so clear that every reasonable person would not hesitate to accept it (har insan, jis ki fitrat salim ho, is ke manane par muztar hai, ibid, p. 659). It seems that Islahi would have the same expectation of any reasonable person regarding the image of God who is both just and merciful.
Conclusions

Islahi distinguishes the Surahs of Surah Group Three on the basis of the flow of their arguments and the style of their expressions (tariq-i-istadlal aur nahj bayan mein farq hai, ibid, p. 629). Usually, Islahi explains this phrase in terms of the brevity of style in one Surah as compared with the more detailed description to be found in another. Islahi should have given a more adequate explanation of the style of expression since it points to a basic difference between Surahs. It is not satisfactory to refer to brevity of style in one Surah as compared with a more detailed account in another.

Islahi frequently opts for the literal or physical meaning of a word according to which a verse describes an actual event. For instance, the expression of horror in verse 90 must be taken at its face value (ye koi mubalagha ka uslub-i-bayan nahin hai balke ek haqiqat ka bayan hai, ibid, p. 686). Moreover, Islahi claims that the language in verse 71 is an expression of a style that has been misunderstood by past commentators. Islahi does not elaborate on this style but refers the reader to a book written by Farahi explaining that particular style (uslub kalam, ibid, p. 679). Islahi should have provided the reader with more clarification about this special style of expression.

In this Surah, Islahi uses two further terms to indicate the context of the verses. The first term is: khas mauqa' o mahal, which refers to the situation in which this Surah was revealed. Islahi says that the context and background to this Surah is the political alliance between the Quraysh and the People of the Book. In fact, the Surah was revealed during the first four years of the Meccan period when there was no question of a political alliance between the Quraysh and the People of the Book. The Surah was probably revealed as a prelude to the migration of some Muslims to the Christian region of Abyssinia. Islahi portrays the Jews and the Christians in a negative light so that his theory about their political alliance with the Quraysh might appear more plausible. He completely disregards the occasions of revelation (shan-i-nuzul) and substitutes concepts that are the product of his own intuitive imagination to describe the context (khas mauqa' o mahal).
nazair, ibid, p. 15), Islahi confirms his explanation about the pronouns of verse 16 (cf. ibid). Sometimes, in order to confirm his explanation of a verse, Islahi summarizes a parallel verse in his own words (ye tafsil ham apne alfaz mein karenge, ibid, p. 47) instead of simply quoting it in full. He gives no consideration to the different socio-historical contexts of these parallel verses.

Yet Islahi is aware of sociological and political factors influencing the decision of the people in power during the dialogue between Moses and the sorcerers (verses 63-64). Islahi says that those in power were just deceiving the people with their words (alfaz mein khitab mahz ‘awam faribi ke liye hai, ibid, p. 63) because Pharaoh’s government and civilization consisted merely of an aristocracy who were intent on using the deprived classes of people for their own advantage (‘awam ko apne kisi maqsud ke liye iste’mal karna chahte hain, ibid). Islahi recognizes the political intrigues going on among the sorcerers in his comment on verse 64, saying that it is the usual practice of political parties to foster antagonism among themselves in order to achieve their own purposes (jis tarah siyasi partiyon mein bahm raqabite hoti hain, ibid). For Islahi, such ideological and political factors are very significant in order to understand the Qur’an.

Verse 65 describes the rules of the contest that is about to begin:

Said (the sorcerers): “O Moses! Either thou throw (thy staff first), or we shall be the first to throw.”

Islahi explains the situation from a psychological point of view (is tarah ke muqablon mein taqdim o takhir ko bari ahammiyat hasil hoti hai. har fariq ki ye khahish hoti hai ke wo apne pahle hi kartab se hazirin ko is tarah mashur kar ke, ibid, p. 64). Moreover, Islahi mentions aspects of society as it was at that time to explain verse 69, describing the common practice of certain vulgar elements in society (is peshah ke log hamesha sosaiti ke arazil o anfar se ta’llug rakhne wale hote hain, ibid, p. 65). He says that no initiative for the reform of society can be expected from such people (lekin sosaiti ki ta’mir o islah mein koi kardar in ka na hota, ibid). Islahi describes the social background of these verses by making observations about society and politics as he understands it at that time.

Furthermore, commenting on verse 70, Islahi calls Pharaoh a shrewd politician who was able to make use of the situation (surat-i-hal ko sanbhalne ki koshish ki, ibid, p. 66) and who did not shrink from using deceptive means to dupe the people (‘awam ko bewaquf banane ke liye
fauran ek neya ashghalah chaura, ibid). Interestingly, Islahi explains the extreme punishment meted out to the sorcerers in verse 71 in terms of the political nature of the crime committed. The sorcerers had challenged the political authority of Pharaoh's government and so their crime was not simply a religious one but took on a political dimension (ye masalah mahz din o 'aqidah ka masalah nahin tha balke bilwast is ke iqtidar ko ek chalanj tha, ibid). Islahi is aware that such a political crime must be dealt with harshly in order to restore the authority of the ruler over his people (us ne bari siyasi zahanat ka subut dia aur kiya 'ajab ke is tarah wo buhton ko bewaquf banane mein kamyab bhi ho gaya, p. 67). According to Islahi, those in power used to give exemplary punishment for such political crimes. Islahi recognizes the fact that the punishment meted out to the sorcerers was in accordance with the custom of the times (jo is zamane mein hukumat ke khilaf sazish karne walon ko di jati thiy, ibid) and was far greater than that meted out by the sorcerers' own leaders (ibid). Islahi also imputes bad motives to the Samaritan, who was the ringleader in the idol worship affair, saying that he had set out to dupe the people (sadah loh 'awam ko bewaquf banane mein kamyab ho gaya, p. 76).

The Appeal to Reason

Islahi repeats the statement he has made elsewhere that the message of the Qur'an is confirmed by the abundant evidence within human beings and around them (quran . . . jo dalail iste'mal karta hai wo bhi afaq o anfus ke wohi dalail hain jo hamare 'aql ke khazane mein maajud hain, ibid, p. 15). Moreover, the necessity for final accountability is so evident for Islahi that he cannot envisage a rational understanding of the world without it (agar aisa na ho to ye dunya ek rahim o hakim ki banai hui dunya nahin balke ek khilandarey ka khel ban ke rah jati hai aur ye bat bil badahat khilaf 'aql hai, ibid, p. 32). Human beings who use their reason can draw the conclusion that God, rather than Pharaoh, is king of the world (fitrat aur 'aql ki rahnumai hi kafi hai, ibid, pp. 57-58). However, in his mercy, God has provided humanity with added guidance through his messengers and through the scriptures (cf. ibid). As verse 54 says:

In all this, behold, there are messages indeed for those who are endowed with reason.

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122 The Qur'an does not say that these punishments were actually carried out. Moreover, it is not clear that the crimes committed by the sorcerers were political in nature. Since the sorcerers were responding in faith to the miracles worked by Moses, it would seem that their behaviour was religiously rather than politically motivated.
For Islahi, this means that the abundant evidence in creation must be obvious to anyone with the faculty of reason (jo dailile hain wo in logon se makhfi nahin ho sakte jin ke andar ‘aql hai aur wo apni ‘aql se kam bhi lete hain, ibid, p. 59).

Islahi compares the account of the childhood of Moses provided in verses 40 of this Surah with the account provided by the second chapter of Exodus in the Bible and finds that the Qur’an accords with reason and nature (qarin-i-‘aql o fitrat hai, ibid, p. 46) and that the Qur’an is more credible than the Torah (zahir hai ke quran ki bai ziyadah qarin-i-qiyas hai, ibid, p. 43). Islahi says that no critical investigation into the difference between these two accounts is needed (taurat aur quran ke bayan mein jo farq hai is par tabhsirah ki zarurat nahin hai, ibid, p. 46). In another place, Islahi compares what the Qur’an and Torah have to say and concludes that such a comparison brings out the original emphasis of the Qur’an (quran ke alfaz ka asal maqam o mahal aur is ka asli zaur samajh mein ayega, ibid, p. 82. Islahi displays a preference for his own unexamined assumptions over an objective analysis of the two texts.123

Islahi appeals to ordinary common sense in order to understand verse 87:

They answered: “We did not break our promise to thee of our own free will, but (this is what happened:) we were loaded with the (sinful) burdens of the (Egyptian) people’s ornaments, and so we threw them (into the fire), and likewise did this Samaritan cast (his into it).”

Islahi says that previous commentators had great difficulty with this verse because of its brevity (ijaz ke sabab se is ke tawil mein hamare mufassarin ko bara iztirab pesh aya hai, ibid, p. 76). Islahi proceeds to express its meaning in his own words (ham apne lafzon mein is ka matlab bayan kareinge, ibid, pp. 76-77). This exercise leads him to reject as inconceivable (bilkul khilaf-i-qiyas, ibid, p. 77) the popular tradition concerning this verse (hamare nazdik ye riwayat sahih nahin hai, ibid) that the jewelry belonged to the Egyptians. Moreover, he notes that the word “threw” has many meanings (wasi‘ ma‘non mein ata hai, p. 78) and states the word refers to the performance of a skill (yahan ye lafz hunar aur kartab dikhane ke ma‘ni mein hai, ibid), which is the same meaning that verse 65 gives to the word (cf. ibid). Islahi has engaged the tradition of commentary (tafsir) and drawn his own conclusion based on persuasive arguments.

\[123\] Islahi’s failure to examine the account of the childhood of Moses in the Torah results in his baseless conclusion that the account in the Qur’an is more credible than that provided in the Torah.
In this Surah, Islahi also displays his attitude to modern society. He says that rejection of belief in God is the folly of today’s world (inkar-i-khuda ki hamaqat maujuda zamane ki paidawar hai, ibid, p. 31). He describes the importance of the press in today’s world in his reflections on verses 35-36 (cf. ibid, p. 38) but rejects modern propaganda (maujuda zamane ke shaitani propaganda, ibid, p. 53) in discussing verse 44. He also makes a reference to the corruption of modern cities (hamare shahr shahr mein, ibid, p. 78). These are comments in which Islahi writes as a social commentator rather than as an exegete.

Different Kinds of Expression

Islahi refers to the metaphorical use of the word for “book” in verse 52:

(Moses) answered: “Knowledge thereof rests with my Sustainer (alone, and is laid down) in His decree; my Sustainer does not err, and neither does He forget.”

Islahi says the environment of the verses makes it quite clear (qarina dalil hai, ibid, p. 58) that the word “decree” in verse 52 does not refer to just any kind of book (koi ye na samjhe ke ye koi aisi waisi kitab hai, ibid) even though the verse describes a record (is ke pas sara rikard mahfuz hai, ibid) or register (rajistar, ibid). Islahi says that the subtle style used in the Surah (nihayat baligh andaz, ibid) indicates that the reference is not just to a book but to the “reward and punishment” implied by the book (hisab o kitab aur jaza o saza ke liye, ibid, p. 58). He says that there was no need for the Prophet Moses to explain this any further since the subtle style of the Surah made it quite clear (hazrat musa ne is ka izhar nahin farmaya lekin in ka andaze kalam khud is ko nihayat khubi ke sath zahir kar raha hai, ibid, pp. 58-59). Islahi adds that occasionally the metaphor speaks for itself and needs no further explanation (ba’z mauqa’ mein kinayah jitna mu’assir hota hai sarahat iti mu’assir nahin hoti, ibid, p. 59). Islahi has identified a metaphorical style of expression in the Surah.

However, Islahi understands the interview between Moses and Pharaoh as simply a factual, though abbreviated, report (yahan bat mukhtasar kar di gayi hai, ibid, p. 61). Islahi states that verses 53-56 and verses 74-76 are interspersed into the dialogue according to a style of speech that is quite different from the style used in the rest of the Surah (in ka andaz upar ki ayat ke andaz se bilkul mukhtalif hai, ibid, p. 68). Islahi has no further comment on these changes of style except to say that God inserted these
verses (wo allah ta’ala hi ke shayani shan hain, ibid). Islahi does not elaborate on the literary character of the discourse.

Likewise, Islahi refers to the style used in verse 75 (uslub-i-bayan par ghaur kijiye, ibid, p. 69) without explaining it any further. He explains the verse by introducing his own parable of a barren tree in order to bring out the meaning more clearly (ek thunth drakht ke manand hai jo borg-o-bar se bilkul khali hai, ibid). The stick used by the Prophet Moses to divide the sea is a sign of his power (ye uslub-i-bayan is ikhtiyar ko zahir karta hai, ibid, p. 71). In other words, Islahi says that the word “stick” is used metaphorically. Earlier, he had referred to the stick of Moses in terms of an Arabic idiomatic expression (’arabi muhavarah, ibid, p. 69) and as a subtle allusion (ek latif kinayah hazrat musa ke ‘asa ki taraf bhi hai, ibid, p. 70). He also refers to the language used in verse 78 to express the fearfulness of the doom that awaited Pharaoh (’arabi mein ye uslub-i-bayan kisi chiz ki aisi haulnaki ya ‘azmat ke izhar ke liye ata hai, ibid). However, Islahi does not make similar observations regarding the style of expression used in verses 83-84:

(And God said:) “Now what has caused thee, O Moses, to leave thy people behind in so great a haste?”

He answered: “They are treading in my footsteps while I have hastened unto Thee, O my Sustainer, so that Thou might be well-pleased (with me).”

Islahi describes what is related in these verses simply as “events” (ye waqe’, ibid, p. 74).

Transcending the Specific Context

Reflecting at length on the phrase from verse 40:

We tried thee with various trials,

Islahi draws a general conclusion of universal significance (in imtehanon se muta’illiq ek haqiqat hamesha mustahzar rakhiye ke ye insan ki ta’lim o tarbiyat ka lazimah hain, ibid, p. 50). Islahi relates these trials to God’s usual way of dealing with humanity (sunnat-i-ilahi, ibid, p. 51) since everyone will be tested, whoever he may be (afrad hon ya aqwam, nek hon ya bad, sab ki azmaish har waqt hote rahtai hai, ibid, p. 75). The idea of testing is a general concept in the light of which (is roshni mein) Islahi understands the historical narrative of the Prophet Moses (imtehanon hi se sabiqah raha, ibid, p. 50) and, therefore, the life of the last Prophet as well.
Islahi further presumes that the disposition to understand the Qur’an exists in people who preserve the integrity of their natural selves (ye taqwa aur ye khauf in tamam logon ke andar maujud hota hai jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz hoti hai, ibid, p. 15) but he does not explain how one is to protect oneself from those things that damage one’s integrity (apni fitrat maskh kar lete hain, ibid). Islahi describes human nature in an abstract way, unrelated to the conditions of the society in which he is living.

Furthermore, Islahi occasionally uses the third person to refer to mankind in general (is se ye rahnumai milte hai, ibid, p. 40) or to all believers (mumin ka ‘aqidah aur kardar banta hai, ibid, p. 42). He also draws a general lesson from the encounter between the Prophet Moses, Harun and Pharaoh, saying that all people in positions of power tend to act like Pharaoh did (arbab-i-iqtidar ahl-i-haq ke muqabalah mein hamesha isi tarah ke harbe iste’mal karte rahe hain, ibid, p. 63). Finally, Islahi outlines a law of accountability that applies across all times and cultures (jinhone khuda ki ni’maton ka haq ada kiya ho wo is ka silah payen aur jinhone in ni’maton ko khuda ki zamin mein fasad ka zare’a banaya ho wo is ki saza bhugaten, ibid, p. 60). Such a law is demanded by a rational approach to the evidence contained in the universe.

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124 It is a sweeping generalization to say that all rulers tend to act as Pharaoh did. One example that would provide a very different image of rulers is the protection afforded by the Negus of Abyssinia to the Muslims.
Conclusions

Islahi reads this Surah in the light (*is roshni mein*) of the conflict between the Prophet and the Quraysh. Against this background, the opening verses take on a special meaning and the historical narrative of Moses has the particular purpose of encouraging and preparing the last Prophet (peace be upon him) for his ordeal. Islahi totally disregards the Hadith that says that the Surah was revealed in the early Meccan period and that it let to the conversion of Hazrat Umar. Islahi justifies his reading of the Surah in this particular social context by making frequent use of words like *mauqa*’ *o mahal dalil hai* (ibid, pp. 29-30) and *qarina bilkul waze hus hai* (ibid, p. 33). In other words, the context leads to the theme and the theme leads back to the context in a circular fashion.

Islahi makes general observations about the oppressive nature of aristocracy and the intrigues common in political parties to explain the encounter between Moses, Pharaoh and the sorcerers. He imputes motives of an ideological, political and psychological nature onto the antagonists in this drama (*jis tarah siyasi partiyon mein bahrain raqabite hoti hain*, ibid, p. 63) and refers to the lower classes of society in a demeaning way (*is peshah ke log hamesha sosaiti ke arazil o anfar se ta'llaq rakhne wale hote hain*, ibid, p. 65). He describes Pharaoh as a leader who was ready to dupe his people (*‘awam ko bewaquf banane ke liye*, ibid, p. 66) and explains the punishment given to the sorcerers as political in nature (*ye masalah mahz din o ‘aqidah ka masalah nahn tha balke bilwast is ke iqtidar ko ek chalanj tha*, ibid). In other words, Islahi describes the social context according to his own assumptions and perceptions about former as well as contemporary conditions in society. His description of the social and the political context is already an interpretation of the Surah.

Besides describing the socio-political background of the verses, Islahi claims that human rationality can demonstrate the logical necessity of accountability on the Last Day. Islahi disagrees with earlier commentators on the Qur’an (*hamare mufassarin*, ibid, p. 76) and appeals to ordinary common sense (*ham apne lafzon mein is ka matlab bayan karenge*, ibid, pp. 76-77) to support his own view and to discredit the popular tradition (*riwayat*) as inconceivable (*bilkul khilaf-i-qiyas*, ibid, p. 77). Islahi also makes comments on modern society (*maujuda zamane*, ibid, p. 53) that rely on his own perceptions and assumptions. Islahi does not acknowledge the
fact that other readers come to the same text with different perceptions and assumptions.

Islahi encourages the reader to take note of the style of expression used in the Surah (uslub-i-bayan par ghaur kijiye, ibid, p. 69) and points out how effective the metaphorical reference to God’s decree is in verse 52 (kinayah jima mu’assir hai, ibid, p. 59). Though he finds other metaphorical allusions (ek latif kinayah, ibid, p. 70) in the Surah, Islahi considers the interview between Moses and Pharaoh to be an abbreviated but factual report (yahan bat mukhtasar kar di gayi hai, ibid, p. 61) and the descriptions of Moses’ great haste in verses 83-84 as events that happened in a prima facie way (ye wae’, ibid, p. 74). Thus, Islahi finds both factual as well as metaphorical expressions in the Surah without explaining the criterion he uses to differentiate between these two kinds of expression.

Finally, Islahi describes human nature in its original, pure form (jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz hoti hai, ibid, p. 15) and posits a universal law of history according to which everyone’s endurance will be tested (imtehanon hi se sabiqah raha, ibid, p. 50). Moreover, all human beings will be rewarded or punished according to “the way of God” (sunnat-i-ilahi, ibid, p. 51). By resorting to these abstract concepts, Islahi abandons the context and conditions of the particular society and culture that had been so significant for him when he explained the meaning of the Surah in terms of the conflict between the Prophet and the Quraysh. In other words, his discourse has shifted from using specific to more abstract concepts, which he claims are to be found in the text of the Qur’an. Islahi moves from one kind of discourse to the other without explaining how they interrelate.
Surah *Al Anbiya*

Introduction

This Surah begins where the previous Surah left off. The last verse of the previous Surah warned the Quraysh that they would not have to wait long for a visible manifestation of the coming punishment (*nishani 'azab*, vol. 5, p. 115). The present Surah begins with the same warning to the Quraysh, saying that the time for their accountability is at hand (*hisab ki ghari*, *ibid*). But the warning was lost on those to whom it was addressed. The people stuck to their view that the world was simply a place for man's entertainment (*bazecha-i-atfal*) and pleasure (*khel tamasha*, *ibid*). They persisted in their devotion to the idols on which they relied for assistance, paying no attention to the teaching of the Prophets.

Whereas the previous Surah focused on the Prophet Moses, this Surah mentions many other Prophets as well. It also clearly forecasts the imminent triumph of the truth (*ghalba haq*) and the conquest of Mecca (*fatah makka*, *ibid*). The Surah thus expresses a final warning to the Quraysh and good news for the Muslims who were involved in the on-going struggle between truth and falsity (*musalmanon ke liye kashmakash-i-haq o batil*, *ibid*). In the subsequent introductions to the various groups of verses, Islahi usually exhorts the reader to understand a particular group of verses in the light of the introduction he has provided (*is roshni mein ayat ki talawat farmaiye*, *ibid*, p. 130).

The inner thoughts of the Prophet are presented as a key to understanding verse 4:

> Say: “My Sustainer knows whatever is spoken in heaven and on earth; and He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing.”

Islahi says the Prophet did not address the unbelievers directly because he knew that they were engaged in idle talk (*ap jante the*, *ibid*, p. 123). Islahi presents the verse as an expression of the Prophet's own faith (*main is mu'amalah ko apne rab hi ke hawalah karta hun*, *ibid*) though he quickly adds that the Qur'ān is not a product of the Prophet's own speech but only of God's revelation (*quran ko nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam khud apne...*)

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275

125 Islahi frequently uses the same expression: *is roshni mein ayat ki tilawat farmaiye*. See, for example, *ibid*, pp. 144, 153, and 187.
The Social Context

In order to establish the coherence of the Surah, Islahi says that there is a close connection (halqah ittisal, ibid, p. 121) between the last verse of the previous Surah and the first verse of the present one. He further establishes the coherence of the Surah by identifying its addressees as the unbelievers of Mecca (mushrikin makka, ibid, p. 121). Hence, the “men” mentioned in verse 1 are the Quraysh:

Closer draws unto men their reckoning: and yet they remain stubbornly heedless (of its approach)

Similarly, verse 3 refers to the leaders of the Quraysh (quraysh ke lidaron aur in ke danishwaron, ibid, p. 122 and p. 126). Islahi says that the language in which this statement is couched represents a style frequently found in the Qur’an. The phrase from verse 50: “will you, then, disavow it?” is also addressed to the Quraysh (ibid, p. 157).

Islahi describes the social context of verse 3 in terms of the particular assumptions and prejudices of the Quraysh (cf. ibid, pp. 122-123). In a similar way, Islahi describes the background of verse 68 (cf. ibid, p. 164). In his discussion of verses 62-63, which describe the way Abraham answers those who ask him about the destruction of their gods, Islahi highlights the significance of the context for understanding the meaning of a word. Islahi says that Abraham’s response is a figure of speech expressing both satire and wisdom (ek latif tanz, ek pur ma’ni istahza aur ek hakimana istidraj, ibid, p. 162). Rejecting any possibility of dishonesty on the part of the Prophet Abraham, Islahi says that the correct meaning of a word with several meanings can only be determined from the context (is ke sahih mafhum ka ta’ayyun is ke siyaq o sabaq se hota hai, ibid, p. 163). Moreover, the kind of idol worship and wrong behavior that Islahi describes as the context or background for the verses of this Surah emerges from his understanding of Arabic society at the time of revelation.126 For Islahi, the verses of the Surah are linked together by the fact that they form part of a coherent narrative.

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126 Islahi says that similar examples illustrating the importance of the context for the meaning of the Surah are to be found in Surah Yusuf (cf. ibid).
Transcending the Specific Context

Islahi attempts to draw more general concepts from the Surah by mentioning the purpose of a verse or group of verses. For instance, in his discussion of verses 72-73, he says that the purpose (maqsud) of the narrative about the Prophets is to enable those people to see and evaluate themselves in a new light (wo is ainah mein apne muh dekhen aur apne qul o 'amal ka jaizah len, ibid, p. 166). Furthermore, Islahi often says that we should read the following verses in the light of the consolation (tasalli) the Prophet received (cf. ibid, p. 144). In a similar way, Islahi collects verses 48-77 in one section and says that these verses were revealed in order to present a particular truth to those who opposed the Prophet (mukhalafin ke samne is haqiqat ko wazeh karna hai, ibid, p. 153).

Furthermore, Islahi moves from the particular reference to the Quraysh to a discussion of human beings in general in his discussion of verse 1 (insan, ibid, p. 122) and to the human heart in his discussion of verse 3 (dil ka asli kam, ibid). Moreover, Islahi has a universal vision for verses 48-49, saying that the light acts as a universal guidance (ye tamam zahini o akhlaqi aur fikri o 'amli tarikyon se nikal kar hidayat, ibid, p. 157). Islahi expresses a similar universal vision for his tenth group of verses (tamam insaniyat, ibid, p. 169).

Moving beyond the specific context at the time of revelation, Islahi draws a general conclusion by saying the God demands a kind of mixture of "religion and world" (din o dunya ki yahi baham amizi khuda ko matlub hai, ibid, p. 175). He does the same when he makes a sweeping statement about scientists (ibid, p. 176) and refers to the ability of all rulers to subdue nature (ek laiq hukumran ka asli kam yahi hai, ibid, p. 177), adding that it is God who gives them the power to do this. Islahi finds another general warning in verse 82 for all such people as would ascribe the power to subdue natural forces to themselves (in logon ke liye jo qudrat ki ba'z quwwaton ko taskhir kar ke ye samajh baiythe hain ke ab ye in ke malik hain, ibid). The narrative about the Prophet Job also provides Islahi with several general conclusions (insan ke lie, ibid, p. 179) and (hamare 'ibadat guzar bandon ke liye, ibid). Similarly, Islahi seems to see the purpose (maqsud) of the narrative about the Prophet Jonah to provide all believers with an example (wo apne ba iman bandon ko isi tarah har gham o alam se najat deta hai jis tarah us ne

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127 Islahi uses the same general concept of consolation (tasalli) on p. 149 and 151.
yunus ko najat di, ibid 184), though it is not so clear that he would include believers who lived after the time of revelation in this category. His discussion of verse 106 leaves the reader with a similar question:

Herein, behold, there is a message for people who (truly) worship God. Islahi does not elaborate explicitly on how the universal teaching that the verse provides extends to believers who live after the time of revelation (yahan munadi 'am aur basharat-i-'am donon ke mazmun ka hamil hai, ibid, p. 199).

**The Appeal to Reason**

The Qur'an invites a person to consider the abundant evidence available in the environment in a rational way (quran ke da'wat tamam tar afaq o anfus aur 'aql o fitrat ke dalail par mabni thi, ibid, p. 125). The Qur'an does not appeal to marvels or miracles or to signs of coming punishment but to the capacity of human intelligence. The natural way to faith is the way of reason (iman ka fitri rastah 'aql o dil ka rastah hai, ibid). Islahi stresses that verses 48-49 also appeal to the use of reason (ibid, p. 157).

Islahi invites the reader to consider how the Prophet Abraham presented his argument in his own peculiarly rational way (hazrat ibrahim alayhi assallam bahs o istadlal mein latif o pakizah tanz se jis tarah kam lete hain isi tarah istidraj bhi hujjat-i-ibrahimi ki ek nihayat numayan khususiyat hai, p. 160). Islahi also tries to argue that the Prophet Jonah was acting according to reason when he went off in anger, according to verse 87:

> And (remember) him of the great fish – when he went off in wrath, thinking that We had no power over him! But then he cried out in the deep darkness (of his distress): “There is no deity save Thee! Limitless art Thou in Thy glory! Verily, I have done wrong!”

Wanting to preserve the Prophet Jonah from the accusation that he acted in anger, Islahi says that the Prophet Jonah's attitude is in keeping with reason ('aql o fitrat ke bilkul mutabiq bhi hai, is se hazrat yunus par koi ilzam bhi 'aid nahin hota, ibid, p. 183). Significantly, Islahi admits that he has derived the meaning of this verse from his own understanding of its purpose and not from any further interpretation of the story (maqsud yahan kissah ki tafsil nahin, ibid). Islahi sees the purpose (maqsud) of the Prophet's crying out from the belly of the fish to show that God is not dependent on the modern media (kisi public platform ya radio aur television ki zarurat hai,
ibid, p. 183). In this case, Islahi has referred to the modern reality of the media to throw light on the verse.

Islahi finds another key argument for the coherence of the Surah by showing how it makes a consistent and plausible argument for the necessity for accountability on the Last Day (muhasabah, yaum alhisab, ibid, p. 130). As verse 16 says:

And (know that) We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play.

If there were no need for accountability, the Creator of the world would simply be someone who plays games and uses the world for his own enjoyment (khilandarey hai jis ne mahz apni tafrih ke liye ye lela rachai hai, ibid). Hence, accountability on the Last Day is a logical necessity (qayamat naguzir hai, ibid). Similarly, to allow unbelief or idol worship (shirk) to go unchecked would allow the world to become a place where people become like children who play games (ye dunya bazicha-i-atfal aur ek khel tamasha, ibid) without having to give any consideration to the outcome of their pastimes.

As a logical consequence of the need for final accountability, Islahi stresses the need for reward and punishment (upar jo bat jaza o saza ke lazmi hone se muta’aliq firmai gayi hai ye is ki dalil bayan hui hai ke agar is dunya ke pichhe koi roz-i-jaza o saza nahin hai . . . to is ke ma’ni ye hue ke us ne ye mahz apna ji bahlane ke liye ek khel tamasha banaya hai, ibid, pp. 132-133) and asserts that the rationale for the divine nature of accountability needs no further clarification (upar ki ayat mein jaza-o-saza ke wajib hone par sifat-i-ilahi se istadlal tha, ibid, p. 134). While admitting that his conclusions are based on his own perception (hamare nazdik, ibid), Islahi proceeds to find the same message of “reward and punishment” in the first twenty-nine verses of the Surah. In all these verses, Islahi depends on his understanding of the Arabic practice by which idols have the power to change the final judgment of God regarding human behavior (ibid. pp. 138-139).

People who commit shirk believe that forces other than God will come to their aid to defend and even to justify their wrong behavior on the Last Day. Islahi interprets verse 108, which is an invitation to surrender to the one God, as a verse denying that any kind of forces could have the ability to save people from God’s wrath (koi dusra tumhein khuda ki pakar se na bacha sakega, ibid, p. 199). To acknowledge the ability of such forces would render the idea of final accountability null and void (qayamat ka hona na
hona donon yaksu hua, ibid, p. 130). His rational criticism of these Arabic practices dominates his entire discussion of these verses. 128

Finally, Islahi simply dismisses Hindu philosophers since they do not deal adequately with the issue of accountability (hindu falasafiyon ne is ko bhagwan ki lela se ta'bir kiya, ibid, p. 133). He also says that contemporary atheists (hamare is zamane ke munkirin o malahidah) do not accept final accountability (inkar-i-qayamat) and that such an attitude results in reducing the world to an idle pastime (bazicha-i-atfal, ibid).

Different Kinds of Language

At other times, Islahi prefers to neglect the social background of a passage from the Surah, basing his understanding on a literal or prima facie analysis of the language. For example, he understands verse 69:

(But) We said: “O fire! Be thou cool, and (a source of) inner peace for Abraham!”

as the expression of a direct intervention by God. 129 Similarly, Islahi understands the story of the Prophet Noah to be an actual event in history (ye ek amar-i-waqi‘ah hai, ibid, p. 168). Moreover, the statement in verse 79:

And we caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds,

is not considered by Islahi to be a poetical use of words but a factual one (ye na khayal farmaiye ke ye mahz sha‘rana khayal arai hai balke ye ek haqiqat hai, ibid, p. 174).

Islahi follows the earlier interpreters by understanding the reference to garments (labusin) in verse 80, as a reference to chain mail:

And We taught him how to make garments.

According to Islahi, history proves that chain mail was actually invented by the Prophet David (tarikh se sabit hai ke . . . hazrat daud ne ijad ki, ibid, p. 174), just as it was the Prophet Solomon who invented the sailing ship that could reach India (tarikhon se ma‘lum hota hai ke . . . unhone aisey badhani jahaz ijad kiye jo hindustan aur maghribi jazair tak safar karte they, ibid, p. 175). Islahi omits to mention that the Qur’an makes these references to

128 Verse 107 states that God’s purpose is not to punish but to bestow his grace (‘azab bona kar nahn bheja hai, ibid, p. 199). Islahi discusses the tension between God’s justice and God’s mercy in Surah Maryam. See the last section of my discussion of Islahi’s commentary on that Surah.

129 Muhammad Asad prefers to understand the verse as an “allegorical allusion to the fire of persecution which Abraham had to suffer”. Asad (1980), p. 496, footnote 64.
various inventions as an illustration of the need to adapt to changing needs and circumstances as the Prophets did.

The "stormy wind" mentioned in verse 81, is understood to be directly subservient to the Prophet Solomon (ham ne sulaiman ke liye tund hawain musakhhar kar di thiy jo is ke hukun se chalti thiy, ibid). Similarly, the "rebellious forces" of verse 82 ("shayatin") are also made subservient to the same Prophet. Islahi goes so far as to say that any good ruler must have the ability to subdue such forces (ek laiq hukumran ka asli kam yahi hai, ibid, p. 177), thereby drawing a universal application in the area of human governance from a particular verse that deals with God's power and glory manifested in the life of Solomon (in ke asli nagran ham they, ibid). In contrast, Islahi hints that verse 104 uses a figure of speech:

On that Day We shall roll up the skies as written scrolls are rolled up.

Islahi discusses this verse by making use of a comparison or a simile (jis tarah . . . jis tarah, ibid, p. 194). Islahi interprets most of these words in a prima facie way but sometimes he accepts a figurative or metaphorical way of interpretation.

On the one hand, for example, he recognizes the words of verse 15:

We caused them to become (like) a field mown down, still and silent as ashes,

to be a metaphorical expression (iste'are, ibid) commonly used in Arabic, yet, on the other hand, he understands the reference to the world (al ard) in verse 44:

Have they never yet seen how We visit the earth (with Our punishment), gradually depriving it of all that is best thereon?

to be indicating the very specific area of Mecca ("al ard" se muraad yahan sar zamin makka hai", ibid, p. 150). Islahi claims to find an identical reference or parallel verse in Surah Ar R'ad, verse 41, understanding all these verses to be an historical reference to the gradual conquest of Mecca by Islam (islam ke isi tadriji ghalbah, ibid, p. 151).\textsuperscript{131}

Islahi says that judgment ('azab) will occur in this world and in the next (ibid, p. 148). In a similar way, Islahi says that success and prosperity has

\textsuperscript{130} Islahi has already discussed this power to subdue natural forces, which was bestowed on the Prophet Solomon, in his discussion of verse 102 of Surah Al Baqarah.

\textsuperscript{131} Shah Wali Ullah has a very similar interpretation of the term al ard, saying that it is a metaphorical expression for the expanding influence of Islam. Cf. his Persian translation of the Qur'an: \textit{Fath Ur Rahman}. 281
been promised to believers in this world and in the next. Accordingly, the word “grace” in verse 75:

Whereas him We admitted unto Our grace: for, behold, he was among the righteous,

refers to prosperity in this world and in the next ('rahmat' se murad wo najat o falah bhi hai jo is dunya mein in ko hasil hui aur wo kamyabi o kamrani bhi jo akhirat mein in ko hasil hogi, ibid, p. 167).

In contrast, however, Islahi says that the statement in verse 105:

My righteous servants shall inherit the earth

cannot be a reference to the present world (zahir hai ke ye abdi warasat ki basharat is zamin se muta'alliq nahin hai jis par ham aur ap abad hain, ibid, p. 195). The phrase can only refer to the way God’s righteous servants will inherit a new earth in a future world (zamin se murad is jahan-i-nau ki zamin se jo qayamat ke ba'd wajud mein ayegi aur jis ke malik o waris bila sharkat ghaire sirfallah ke nekokar bande honge, ibid, p. 199). At the same time, Islahi has no hesitation in saying that verse 41 from Surah Al Hajj refers to the success and prosperity which is the consequence of the conquest of Mecca:

(Well aware of) those who, (even) if We firmly establish them on earth, remain constant in prayer, and give in charity, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong; but with God rests the final outcome of all events.  

Islahi presents a confusing picture of success and prosperity in this world.

Links between the Verses

Islahi finds further evidence of the coherence of the Qur’an by discovering thematic links between verses in different places throughout the Surah. For example, Islahi sees a connection between the first words of the Surah:

Closer draws unto men their reckoning

with similar words found in verse 97 of the Surah:

the while the true promise (of resurrection) draws close (to its fulfillment).

Islahi says that this verse deals with the same topic as the first verse (yahi mazmun is surah ki pahli ayat mein bhi guzar chukka hai, ibid, p. 191). According to Islahi, such a connection between verses is a direct indication of the coherence of the Surah (is tarah quran apne nazm ki taraf khud

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132 Islahi says that similar references to the conquest of Mecca occur in verse 41 of Surah An‘ad and in verse 44 of Surah An‘al‘im (cf. ibid, p. 258).
rähnumāi kar deta hai, ibid, p. 187). Islahi says that Farahi, his teacher, discovered this way of linking similar verses in the Qur’an (ibid).

Islahi also makes uses of parallel verses as a way of confirming his understanding of the text. Although he acknowledges that a verse or group of verses has its own particular context in each case (lekin is ka ek khas mahal hai, ibid, p. 143), Islahi does not investigate how the different contexts of each verse impact on their interpretation. He demonstrates the same general approach by his general reference to shirk as if to say that the term can be used to describe contexts quite different from the specific context of the Quraysh (jo log kisi shirk mein mubtala hote hain, ibid, p. 148). Since Islahi does not provide examples of different kinds of shirk, he implies that shirk is basically of one kind only.

The Way of God

Another concept that helps Islahi to establish the coherence of the Surah is that of “the way of God” (sunnat allah), which includes the notion of the completion of the arguments (itmam-i-hujjat, ibid, p. 122). Islahi uses these concepts to explain the consequences of the persistently negative response of the Quraysh. Consequently, Islahi can say that the “divine writ” mentioned in verse 10, refers to the way God made his arguments abundantly clear to the Quraysh (khuda ki jo sunnat aj tak jari rahi hai, ibid, p. 128) as he did before through the earlier Prophets (hujjat tamam, ibid, p. 127). Islahi says that verse 95, which describes the way God destroyed previous peoples because of their stubbornness, applies to the Quraysh and instructs the Prophet not to be over concerned at their refusal to believe. The time of God’s punishment has now come (ab ye log sunnat ilahi ki zid mein a chuke hain, ibid, p. 190).

Moreover, verse 87 throws further light on the concept of “the way of God” by interpreting the verse to be telling the Prophet Jonah that only God can decide when the time has come to give up all hope for the conversion of a nation and to leave them to their punishment (sirf khuda hi janta hai ke kab kisi qaum ka paimana labrez hota hai, ibid, p. 180). Similarly, the Prophets waited for God to reveal the right time for migration (hijrat) and understood this as “the way of God” (hazrat anbiya ke liye hamesha ye sunnat ilahi rohi

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133 For example, cf. ibid, p. 127, 129, and pp. 142-143.
Thus, Islahi uses the concept of “the way of God” to focus on the Prophet and the Quraysh according to the theme (‘umud) of the Surah.
Conclusions

Islahi wants the verses of the Surah to be read in the light (is roshni mein) of the separate introduction that he provides for each group of verses. This introduction prepares the reader to understand the verses according to the theme (‘umud) that Islahi has formulated. On this basis, Islahi establishes that the addressees of the Surah are the leaders of the Quraysh. Moreover, he demonstrates the coherence of the Surah by referring to a link (halqah ittisal, ibid, p. 121) between this Surah and the previous one. He concludes that the Surah is thematically and structurally coherent.

Islahi highlights the social and the cultural background of the Surah, stressing that an understanding the verses must be based on the practice of Arabic society at the time of revelation (is ke sahih mafhum ka ta’ayyun is ke siyaq o sabaq se hota hai, ibid, p. 163). Islahi also allows the historical background to provide useful information. For example, verse 80 is an actual reference to chain mail invented by the Prophet David and verse 81 describes the sailing ship invented by the Prophet Solomon. By saying that the times have changed (ab zamana bahut badal chuka hai, ibid, p. 175), Islahi indicates that some verses in the Surah express historical realities that are no longer significant today. But Islahi fails to bring out the main point of these inventions mentioned in the Qur’an, which is to affirm that the Prophets were able to adapt themselves to the changing needs of the time. In other words, he has not paid any attention to the universal meaning of these verses.

Islahi says that the language of the Qur’an is sometimes factual and sometimes metaphorical. For example, the language about the fire in verse 69 and about the mountains and the birds in verse 79 is factual and not poetical (ye ek haqiqat hai, ibid, p. 174). Similarly, according to Islahi, verse 82 implies that any good ruler (ek laiq hukumran) must have the ability to subdue nature. At other times, Islahi says that the language of the Surah uses a figure of speech. For instance, Abraham’s response to those who ask him about the destruction of their gods in verses 62-63 is couched in figurative language (ek latif tanz, ek par ma’ni istahza aur ek hakimana istidraj, ibid, p. 162). Islahi does not provide the reader of the Qur’an with the guidance he needs to distinguish between factual and metaphorical language.
Moreover, Islahi is ambiguous as to how success and prosperity occur both in this world and in the next. By giving a material connotation to the word for “the earth” (al ardf) in verse 44, Islahi says that the verse refers to the physical victory by the Muslims over Mecca. Even although he claims that success and prosperity is an experience in this world and in the next, Islahi cannot understand the reference to “inheriting the earth” in verse 105 as referring to the present world (cf. ibid, p. 195):

My righteous servants shall inherit the earth.

It seems clear, however, that this phrase promises that those competent to govern will exercise power in this world. Since Islahi understands the words “righteous servants” as a reference to pious servants in a religious sense, he fails to understand how the verse can have any bearing on the present world. For pious Muslims do not rule the world.

Islahi rejects the story of the field in verses 78-79 as one example of the hypotheses (mafruzat) introduced by earlier commentators on the Qur’an because such hypotheses are external to the Qur’an (quran se ek bilkul kharij chiz hai, ibid, p. 173). On the other hand, Islahi draws on information from Arabic traditions regarding the worship of idols to elaborate on the background of this Surah. In fact, he frequently includes material about Arab customs to understand the meaning of a verse. Moreover, in Surah Al Ahzab, he makes many references to books of traditions and to historical accounts.

Finally, Islahi argues that the Surah is a thematically coherent narrative because of the many parallel verses and the links that exist between the verses of the Surah. One pre-requisite of this approach, which he attributes to his teacher, Maulana Farahi, is that a concept like shirk has the same meaning in every context, culture or period. Likewise, the abstract ideas of ittam-i-hujjat and sunnat-i-ilahi apply in all circumstances. I detect an inconsistency in Islahi’s approach between his attention to the particular context of a Surah, even saying that each verse has its own specific context (is ka ek khas mahal hai, ibid, p. 143) and his use of abstract concepts that completely disregard this specific context.

134 Islahi finds a similar reference to the victory of the Muslims in Mecca in verse 41 of Surah Ar Rod and in verse 60 of Surah Al Isra.
135 Muhammad Asad says that the story or legend of the field was “well-established in ancient Arabian tradition”. Asad (1980), pp. 496-497, footnote, 70.
136 I have referred to these traditions (riwayat se ma’hum hota hai, vol. 6, p. 212) and historical accounts (tarikhon se ma’hum hota hai, vol. 6, p. 211) in my discussion of Surah Al Ahzab.
Surah Al Hajj

Introduction

Islahi situates this Surah in the period when the Muslim believers had almost reached the full extent of their subjugation and oppression by the unbelieving Quraysh, thereby provoking their exodus or migration from Mecca. The Prophet's own migration was imminent (hijrat ka waqt bilkul qarib a chukka tha, vol. 5, p. 203). The Surah makes a final appeal to the Quraysh to believe in the oneness of God and in the coming Day of Reckoning. The Quraysh are also reminded how the Prophet Abraham had already made it plain that the construction of the House of Prayer would be entrusted, not to the Quraysh but to Muslim believers, who had been barred from entry (bait allah ke maqsud ta'mir ki roshni mein in par ye haqiqat wazeh ki gayi ke is ghar ki tuliat ke asl haqdar mushrikin nahin balke wo musalman hain jin ko unhone is se mahrum kar rakha hai, ibid). Islahi says that the conquest of Mecca had already been alluded to in verse 44 of the previous Surah and that it is referred to categorically in this Surah (bilkul qat 'i faislah ki surat, ibid). While the Quraysh are told in no uncertain terms that they will be excluded from the House of Prayer, the Muslims are given the good news that they will be entrusted with its guardianship (is ka amin o mutawalli banayega, ibid). Islahi interprets the Surah in the light of this basic antagonism between the Quraysh and the Muslims. The former are described as usurpers (quraysh ka khana ka'ha par tasallut bilkul ghasabana hai, ibid) and the latter are given permission to use the sword to defend themselves (talwar uthane ka haq, ibid) because the rightful keepers of the House of Prayer are the Muslims (is ki tuliat ke asli haqdar musalman hain na ke quraysh, ibid).

The Socio-Political Context

Islahi explains verse 17 on the basis of the specific context at the time of revelation:

Verily, as for those who have attained to faith (in this divine writ), and those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Magians, (on the one hand,) and those who are bent on ascribing divinity to aught but God, (on the other,) verily, God will decide between them on Resurrection Day: for, behold, God is witness unto everything,
Islahi argues that the verse is an expression of the conflict that existed between the Muslims and the Quraysh (ye munazara ke asli fariq to musalman aur mushrakin quraysh hi they, ibid, p. 228). Islahi states that the main conflict was between the believers (ahl iman) and the unbelievers (mushrakin), which in verse 17 includes the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians and the Magians (cf. ibid). Moreover, Islahi sees a link between verse 17 and the sentence in verse 19:

These two contrary kinds of man have become engrossed in contention about their Sustainer!”

Islahi argues that this sentence confirms the existence of a conflict between two factions (asl fariq do hain, ibid). It is remarkable that Islahi includes the Jews in one group together with the unbelievers (is maidan mein ek taraf musalman they dusri taraf mushrakin aur yahud, ibid).

Furthermore, Islahi finds a thematic link between verse 17 of this Surah and verse 62 of Surah Al Baqarah. Both verses refer to the faith of other groups like the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians and the Magians. While verse 17 simply says: “God will decide between them on Resurrection Day” (cf. the similar phrase in verse 69), Islahi says the verse points to a conflict between the various groups mentioned in these verses and he concludes that the passage of time results in the corruption of former religions (imtidad-i-zamanah se har din ka huliyah bigra, ibid, p. 227). Moreover, Islahi says that the Jews changed the account of history (tarikh ki is sar guzasht, ibid, p. 241) from that contained in the Qur’an (unhone hazrat ibrahim ki ek man gairat tarikh banai, ibid), thereby showing that the corruption of the former Scriptures (tahrif, ibid) was the result of a different version of history. For example, the Jews claim that “the Most Ancient Temple”, referred to in verse 29, was built by the Prophet Solomon and not by the Prophet Abraham (hazrat sulaiman alayhi assallam ke hathon ta’mir hua hai, ibid, p. 245).

Islahi is even more explicit about the nature of the conflict between two groups in his discussion of verses 19-22, saying that the Jews, the Christians, the Sabians, the Magians and the unbelievers (mushrkin) are all different factions united in their common rejection of Islam (islam ki mukhalafat mein, ibid, p. 231). Islahi seems to polarize the situation by grouping all these factions together into one party and by setting them up against the Muslims (sab ko ek hi parti qarar dia aur in ke mugabil mein musalmanon ko ek mustaqil parti ki haisiyat di, ibid, p. 232). Islahi finds confirmation of this reading of the Surah (in terms of the conflict between two parties) in verse 3:
And yet, among men there is many a one who argues about God without having any knowledge (of Him), and follows every rebellious satanic force.\textsuperscript{137}

Islahi says that the People of the Book definitely sided with the Arab unbelievers (ibid).

Islahi also finds a thematic link between verse 67 of the present Surah:

Unto every community have We appointed (different) ways of worship, which they ought to observe

and verse 148 of Surah \textit{Al Baqarah} and verse 48 of Surah \textit{Al Maidah}. Islahi understands all these verses as expressions of protest that were made against different groups and not as an invitation to be tolerant of them (\textit{ye yahud o nisara ke sath rawadari ki hidayat nahin hai}, ibid, p. 283). In other words, these verses should be understood according to the specific context of their time.

Islahi realizes that it was not easy for the Quraysh, who enjoyed a pre-eminent position in the whole area (\textit{quraysh ko sirf makka hi mein siyadat o imarat hasil nahin they balke . . . pure 'arab par in ki mazhabi peshwai ki dhak batti hui thi}, ibid, p. 234), to give up all the advantages accruing to them on account of their religious and socio-political pre-eminence. Hence, they were eager to keep the Muslims at bay (\textit{unhone musalmanon ko haram ki hazri se bhi mahr um kar dia}, ibid). Islahi says that verses 25-37 were revealed in these conditions (\textit{in halat mein ye ayat utri}, ibid) and were meant to function as a mirror for the Quraysh (\textit{ye goya ek aina hai jo quraysh ke samne rakh dia gaya}, ibid, p. 235) while providing encouragement for the Muslims (\textit{musalmanon ki is mein hauslah afzai bhi farmai gayi hai}, ibid). The passage must be read in this light (\textit{is roshni mein}, ibid). Islahi proceeds to do precisely that by interpreting all the instructions about the rites of pilgrimage in these verses as a direct rebuttal of the unnecessary practices instituted by the Quraysh (\textit{mushrikin ne hazrat ibrahim ki tamam muqaddas riwayat apne dunwi mafadat ki khatir bilkul badal dal dia}, ibid, p. 245).\textsuperscript{138}

Islahi also refers to the false propaganda spread by the Jews (\textit{islam ke khilaf fitnah angezi aur waswasah andazi ka zariyah banaya. unhone ye propaganda karna sharu' kar dia}, ibid, p. 249).

\textsuperscript{137} The wording of verse 8 differs only slightly: “And yet, among men there is many a one that argues about God without having any knowledge (of Him), without any guidance, and without any light-giving revelation.”

\textsuperscript{138} The Quraysh did not change the rites of pilgrimage for their own benefit, however. They made only a few small changes—such as not proceeding to Mount Arafat with the other pilgrims.
Islahi groups verses 37-41 together because they are an expression of the new situation of the Muslims in Medina and of their right to become the custodians of the House of Prayer since the Quraysh had forfeited this right by neglect and misuse. The Quraysh and the People of the Book both used the Muslims’ readiness for war as a reason for the propaganda they brought against them (quraysh aur in ke halif – ahl kitab – is chiz ko bhi islam aur musalmanon ke khilaf propaganda ka zare’a banate, ibid, p. 252). Islahi says that verse 38 acts as an introduction for this group of verses (tamhid, ibid, p. 254) and that the phrase from this verse:

God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude

points directly to the way the Quraysh betrayed their responsibility to supervise the House of Prayer (in ko haram ki pasbani sapard hui thi, ibid) by controlling it for their own advantage (is ghar par apni ajadari qaim kar ke, ibid). Now the time has come for the House of Prayer to be taken from those unworthy of it and to be restored to its rightful custodians (ab waqt a gaya hai ke khuda apne haram ko in napakon se pak kare aur apne in bandon ko is ki tauliat sapard kare jo is ibrahimi amanat ka haqdar ada karen, ibid).

Hence, the conflict between truth and falsity (kashmakash haq o batil, ibid, p. 211) arose in a particular situation in which the opponents of the Prophet began to notice the growing strength of Islam (islam ki barhti hui taqat ko dekh kar, ibid, p. 210). Islahi explains verse 52 in terms of the struggle between truth and falsity (haq o batil mein ye kashmakash, ibid, p. 269) and verse 53 in terms of the opposition coming from the Quraysh and the Jews (quraysh aur yahud, ibid, p. 271). He has a similar explanation for verse 58 (kuffar-i-quraysh ke zulm o satm, ibid, p. 278). Furthermore, Islahi interprets verse 60 in terms of the oppression Muslims were experiencing at that time (mazlum musalman, ibid, p. 249) and during the period of migration (hijrat ke waqt, ibid, p. 250). Islahi ends with a general piece of advice for all Muslims, telling them that they should manifest the qualities of God in their lives (tumhara rab apni sifat ka ‘aks tumhare andar bhi dekhna chahta hai, ibid), thereby moving beyond the specific context of the time.

Transcending the Specific Context

Islahi says that the phrase from verse 11:
And there is, too, among men many a one who worships God on the border-line (of faith) describes foolish people in general (ye ahmaq log, ibid, p. 222), though he is probably referring to people living at the time of revelation. He also makes a general criticism of the commonly held attitude of negligence with regard to the Qur’an (cf. ibid). Similarly, Islahi says that verses 14-15 refer to the reward given to people in general (in logon ke anjam, ibid, p. 224) whom he later gives a particular designation as Muslims (is mein musalmanon ke liye taqat o basharat hai, ibid, p. 225). Again, the phrase from verse 18: “And many human beings” refers, in a general way, to all mankind (insan . . . wo ashraf almakhluqat aur khalifatuh allah fil ard hote hue, ibid, p. 230). Islahi goes on to explain the phrase in terms of all people (insan ka asli sharf tauhid hai, ibid, p. 225) and as an expression of the universal truth contained in the verse (haqiqat, ibid).

However, Islahi identifies the Quraysh as those to whom verses 25-26 specifically refer (ye isharah quraysh ki taraf hai, ibid, p. 238) for it is the Quraysh who have misused the House of Prayer (ab is ko quraysh ne kiya bana kar rakh dia, ibid, p. 242). Similarly, verse 27 refers to the Quraysh (is mein bhi quraysh ke riwayat par ta’riz hai, ibid). Similarly, Islahi understands verses 61-62 in terms of the corruption spread by those opposed to the Prophet at that time (jo is ki dunya mein fasad barpa kar rahe hain, p. 280). Yet the next verse is interpreted in a more general way (koi maujuda zahiri halat, ibid, p. 281). Moreover, the last word of verse 66 refers to “man” in general but Islahi says it is directed to all those who opposed the Prophet (inha mukhalafin ki taraf hai, ibid, p. 282), according to a special Qur’anic style. Likewise, verse 70 is addressed to the Prophet but Islahi says it is directed to his opponents (is ka rukh tamam tar mukhalafin ki taraf hai, ibid, p. 284).

Islahi also draws a general conclusion about the proper balance between religion and the world (din o dunya ki bahm amizi ka e’tidal, ibid, p. 243) from verse 28, which allows the believers to eat of the meat of their sacrifices. The question remains as to whether Islahi moves beyond the specific context of the verse in this commentary or whether his observation on this verse refers to the time of revelation.

139 Islahi makes a similar reference to foolish people on the next page (cf. ibid, p. 223).
140 Actually, the Quraysh assisted the pilgrims in all sorts of practical ways. Consequently, verses 25-26 do not refer to the behaviour of the Quraysh but to others who profaned the House of Prayer.
The responsibility for *jihad* is another topic about which Islahi’s remarks sometimes move beyond the specific context to encompass all Muslims. Islahi expressly states that permission to engage in *jihad* is given also to Muslims today under certain conditions (*isi tarah aj musalmanon ko bhi ye iijazat di ja rahi hai*, ibid, pp. 256-57). Islahi frequently refers to the fact that the Prophet Abraham prayed that his descendants would preserve the sanctity of the House of Prayer. He assumed that the Muslims would accomplish this as soon as they were settled around the House of Prayer (*agar ham apne in bandon ko . . . iqtidar bakhshenge to ye is ke tamam magasad ko azre nau barwe kar layenge*, ibid, p. 258). He also says that verse 41 proclaims the good news to the Muslims that they will soon be established in power (*dunya mein musalmanon ke iqtidar o tamakan ki pahli basharat yahi hai*, ibid), beginning with the House of Prayer, the heart of the Muslim community (*millet*). It is the duty of all Muslim communities to pay heed to their responsibility for reform (*ba 'inah yahifarizah musalmanon par har is sar zamin ke liye 'aid hota hai jahan allah ta 'ala in ko iqtidar bakhshenge, ibid*). Islahi makes it the universal right of every Muslim to defend the House of Prayer from usurpation by unbelievers, even by performing *jihad* if need be (*tamam dunya ke musalmanon par jihad farz ho jayega*, ibid, p. 240).

Islahi also makes all-encompassing remarks about Islam. The Prophet Abraham had prayed that *islam*, which is a quality belonging to all creation (*islam to tamam kainat ki fitrat hai*, ibid, p. 289), would be a name given to the Muslims as a group (*us ka nam unhone pahli hi se umat-i-muslimah rakha tha*, ibid). Hence, God gave the Muslims this name as soon as they appeared (*jab is umat ka zahur hua*, ibid). " Islahi tells all Muslims to keep this history constantly in mind (*apni is tarikh ko barabar yad rakho*, ibid).

The Prophet Abraham’s sacrifice is an example of *islam* (*islam ki is haqiqat ka izhar farmaya ke muslim ko har waqt apni ‘aziz se ‘aziz she apne rab ki khatir qurban karne ke liye taiyar rahna chaiye*, ibid, p. 247). Islahi refers to the true *muslim* in the same way (*haqiqi mumin o muslim hai*, ibid, p. 248). Moreover, *Islam* and *taqwa* are connected in meaning in the same way

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141 It is misleading to say that the Muslims would accomplish *jihad* as soon as they were settled around the House of Prayer. Since *jihad* is the struggle against injustice and oppression, it is not focused on Mecca but takes place wherever there is a need.

142 In fact, the followers of the earlier Prophets from the time of Abraham were already called by the name *muslim*. Cf. verse 78 of the present Surah:

It is He who has named you — in bygone times as well as in this (divine writ) — “those who have surrendered themselves to God”.

292
as *Islam* and *ikhbat* (ibid, p. 251). Finally, the purpose of Satan’s efforts is to free people, in general, from rote imitation (*taqlidi taur par na ikhtiyar kare*, p. 272).

In its final verses, Islahi says the Surah returns to the specific context of the Muslims living at the time of revelation by mentioning the mandate (*mansub-i-imamat*, ibid, p. 287) given to them in order to guard the House of Prayer. Islahi interprets the phrase “it is He who has elected you” of verse 78 as a statement regarding the election of the Muslims for this purpose and the deposition of the Quraysh and the Jews (*dusron ko khwa quraysh ho ya yahud, ma’zul kar ke intikhab kiya*, ibid, p. 288). This brings out the meaning of the election (*ye is intikhab ka maqsud bayán hua hai ke allah ne tumhara intikhab sab ko ma’zul kar ke*, ibid, p. 289) and Islahi finds a connection between this verse and verse 143 of Surah *Al Baqarah*, in which the Muslims are told to give witness to the true *din* (*allah ke din ki gawahi dene wale bano*, ibid).

Islahi refers to other verses in the Qur’an (*quran ke nazair*, ibid, p. 218) to confirm his understanding of this Surah. He does not consider it necessary for further investigation into the specific context of these parallel verses. Islahi illustrates the fact that a verse can have many meanings by referring to the many meanings of verse 34 (*mukhtalif ma’ni*, ibid, p. 248). Furthermore, since Islahi applies the word for “earth” (*al ard*) in verse 41 of this Surah to the area around Mecca, he finds a parallel between this verse and verse 41 of Surah *Ar R’ad* and to verse 44 of Surah *Al Anbiya* (cf. ibid, p. 258). Islahi finds this concept referred to again in the phrase from verse 77 of the present Surah: “so that you may attain to a happy state!” He says these words allude to the place the believers can expect to find (*is se is tumakan fil ard ki salahiyat bhi tumhare andar ubaregi*, ibid, p. 288).

**Different Kinds of Language**

Islahi views the phrase from verse 15: “let him reach out unto heaven” as an example of a metaphor (*ek iste’arah hai*, ibid, p.225) and says that such metaphorical expressions occur also in the Urdu language (ibid). Verse 18 describes how all things and beings prostrate themselves before God. Islahi elucidates this further by describing in detail how the sun, moon, stars,
mountains and animals actually perform the prostrations (*apne rab ke age qiyam, ruku' aur sajde mein hain*, ibid, p. 229). Even the shade has a lesson for us in this regard (ibid). These observations seem to indicate Islahi’s acceptance of figurative language in the Qur’an since it is clear that nature can only perform such prostrations in a figurative way. Islahi is aware that the way human beings prostrate themselves before God is distinct from the way other creatures do this. He quotes verse 15 of Surah *Ar R‘ad* and verses 48-49 of Surah *An Nahl* to illustrate the difference between the worship of God by inanimate objects (*be iradah ashiya*) and the worship of God performed by human beings (*apne ikhtiyar o irade ko allah hi ke amr o hukm ke tabe’ kar dia hai*, ibid, p. 230). The two different kinds of worship can be related to each other by means of a comparison or a simile (*jis tarah. . . isi tarah*, ibid).

However, Islahi describes the punishment meted out to those who are bent on denying the truth (cf. ibid, p. 232), as it is described in verses 19-21, without giving any indication that the language used in these verses may be metaphorical in kind:

> But (thus it is:) as for those who are bent on denying the truth – garments of fire shall be cut out for them (in the life to come); burning despair will be poured over their heads, causing all that is within their bodies, as well as the skins, to melt away. And they shall be held (in this state as if) by iron grips.

On the contrary, Islahi finds that the punishment fits the nature of their wrongdoing (*yahan ‘amal aur jaza ki mushabahat*, ibid, p. 233) and uses the same kind of language to describe the reward provided for those who deserve it (ibid).

It is interesting to note that Islahi recognizes the influence of a particular culture on the way language is understood (*ahl ‘arab misriyori aur iraniyon ke tamaddun se muta’ssir they*, ibid, p. 234).\(^{144}\) Since each new period introduces its own peculiar understanding, Islahi says that we must be aware of the meaning grasped by those to whom the verses were first addressed (*ahwal-i-akhirat ki ta’bir in alfaz o tamsilat se ki jati hai jo mukhatab ke liye qarib alfahm hon*, ibid, p. 234). Hence, the phrase from verse 27:

> they will come unto thee on foot and on every (kind of) fast mount

is an expression of metaphors (*iste’arat*, ibid, p. 243), which need to be understood according to the changing times (*ab zamana ki taraqi ne is daur*).\(^{144}\)

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\(^{144}\) It would seem that Arabic culture was influenced more by Syria and Iraq than by Egypt, however.
mein buson, lariyon, motoron aur hawai jahazon ko bhi sharik kar dia hai, ibid). Islahi focuses on the particular context for the correct meaning of these verses (in ayat ka siyaq is bat par dalil hai, ibid) and concludes that an Islamic government has a duty to safeguard the pilgrimage. In a similar vein, Islahi explains the concept of a “plain warner” (nazirun mubin) of verse 49 by means of a discussion of Arabic customs prevalent at the time.

Moreover, since life in the dry Arabian surroundings depends on the availability of water, Islahi understands the phrase from verse 45: “And how many a well lies abandoned” as a symbolic expression of the destruction that occurred (kunwiyon ki wirani ta'bir hai sari hama hami aur tamam chahal pahal ke khatm ho jane ki, ibid, p. 264). Similarly, the phrase from the same verse: “how many a castle that (once) stood high!” is a symbolic expression of the pomp and splendor of life that has now vanished (is ka matlab ye hoga ke kitne parshakwa aur buland o bala awan o mahal hain jo bilkul mattruk o mahjaur pare hain, ibid). In the same way, Islahi says that the word for “goodly sustenance” in verse 58 is an expression for God’s limitless blessings (khuda ke bepayan ni’mat, ibid, p. 279). In addition, Islahi says that the Surah contains several parables (tamsil) and comparisons or similes. He does not elaborate on the way these literary devices should be understood except to mention that the parable in verse 47 is similar to that found in the Gospel (cf. ibid, pp. 265-266).

The way of God

The “way of God” (sunnat ilahi) is usually combined with the concept of the completion of revelation (itmam-i-hujjat, ibid, p. 221) Islahi explains these concepts in terms of the time of revelation (is daur mein, ibid), which seems to limit their application to that period of time. Yet these concepts help him answer his own questions about the way corruption and oppression continues to exist in the world, in spite of God’s revelation through the Prophet. Islahi explains that the concept of “the way of God” allows evildoers a respite (dhil) until God decides that they cannot be converted. Believers, however, are given the good news of their future success but have

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145 Islahi says that verse 31 contains a parable (cf. ibid, p. 246) and that verse 73 also contains a parable (cf. ibid, p. 285). He also explains verses 49-51 in the way of a comparison (jis tarah, ibid, p. 267) and that verse 49 can be explained in the same way (jis tarah, ibid, p. 266).

146 Islahi sometimes combines these two concepts in this Surah. For example, cf. ibid, pp. 271-272.

147 For examples of the way Islahi sets these concepts in the context of the time of revelation, cf. ibid, p. 227, pp. 230-231, p. 259 and p. 269.
to endure a period of waiting during which God provides various tests (imtehan) of their sincerity.
Conclusions

In his introduction, Islahi says the Surah is Meccan because of the imminent migration (*hijrat ka waqt bilku qarib a chukka*, ibid, p. 203). Most scholars, however, are of the opinion that the Surah is Medinan and that it was revealed around the same time as Surah *Al Baqarah*.

Further, Islahi seems to see an essential connection between the purpose of the construction of the House of Prayer and its custodianship by the Muslims (*bait allah ke maqsud ta’mir . . . ke is ghar ki tuliat ke asl haqdar . . . musalman hain*, ibid). But the issue of custodianship of the House of Prayer was not part of the purpose for its construction, which was to provide a focal point for the pilgrimage and other rituals. The custodianship of the House of Prayer had passed through many hands since the time of Abraham. Shortly after the death of the last Prophet (peace be upon him), there were four rival parties competing for its custodianship and those with political and military power took over this responsibility. It was not a religious responsibility as such.

Islahi rejects the way earlier commentators presented the “occasions of revelation” (*hamare mufasarain ne . . . apni kitabon mein is ayat ki shan-i-nuzul ki haisiyat se daraj kar di hai*, ibid, p. 271) and argues that many verses have no need of an “occasion of revelation” (*kisi shan-i-nuzul ki mukhtaj nahin hai*, ibid) as their context emerges from a close study (tadabbur) of the text.148 For example, as a result of investigating the text itself, Islahi finds that the Surah is directed to the Quraysh (*ye isharah quraysh ki taraf hai*, ibid, p. 238). However, the text of the present Surah does not support the theory of a conflict between the Muslims and the Quraysh. Islahi also says the Surah makes an allusion to the Quraysh (*is mein bhi quraysh ke riwayat par ta’riz hai*, ibid, p. 242). Clearly, Islahi gives greater significance to such allusions that he finds within the text than to the “occasions of revelation”. His general rejection of the *shan-i-nuzul*, however, goes against the general view of Muslim scholars.

148 Neal Robinson writes: “Amin Ahsan Islahi has demonstrated that whereas the various *ashab an-nuzul* often give the impression that a Surah is a series of disconnected revelations, a painstaking examination of the Surah itself usually shows that it is a unified whole with a coherent structure. He therefore considers that these traditions should only be taken into account when dealing with *ayahs* which refer explicitly to specific incidents.” Robinson (1996), p. 63.
Islahi views the Surah in the light (is roshni mein) of the intense conflict between two factions (asl fariq do hain, ibid, p. 228): the Muslims (ahl iman) and the unbelievers (mushrikin). It is remarkable that Islahi includes the Jews in one group together with the unbelievers (ek taraf musalman they dusri taraf mushrikin aur yahud, ibid) – since the Jews were believers. Yet this is consistent with the way he understands the election, mentioned in verse 78, as referring only to the Muslims (dusron ko khwa quraysh ho ya yahud, ma’zul kar ke, ibid, p. 288) and to the deposition and the exclusion of all others (allah ne tumhara intikhab sab ko ma’zul kar ke, ibid, p. 289). The Muslims were on one side and everyone else was on the other.

However, this does not seem to be consistent with the way Islahi understands verses 52-54 of the following Surah Al Mu’minun, which describes God’s original purpose in establishing a single religious community (ek hi ummat - ummat muslimah - ke qaim karne ki jiddo-jahd ki, ibid, p. 326). The one religion (din) is present in all communities and peoples (tamam milleton aur qaumon ka asal din, ibid). How does Islahi find a place for the Jews and the Christians in a din from which they have been deposed and excluded?149

Accordingly, he finds a common element between verse 67 of the present Surah, verse 148 of Al Baqarah and verse 48 of Al Maidah and says that these verses are not an expression of tolerance of these different religious groups (ye yahud o nisara ke sath rawadari ki hidayat nahin hai, ibid, p. 283) but, on the contrary, are expressions of protest against their practices. Islahi reads these verses in the light of the particular situation of conflict and polarization that he has described between the Muslims and all the other groups (in halat mein ye ayat utrin, ibid, p. 234). In this case, these verses would apply only to those groups at that time in history and have no further meaning today.

Occasionally, Islahi seems to make general statements that could refer to Muslims of all times and places (musalmanon par har is sar zamin ke liye, ibid, p. 258). He gives general advice to Muslims (cf. ibid, p. 250) and makes all-encompassing remarks about Islam (islam to tamam kainat ki fitrat hai, ibid, p. 289). He also urges all Muslims to take up jihad under certain conditions (aj musalmanon ke bhi ye ijazat di ja rahi hai, ibid, pp. 256-257) and gives every Muslim the right to defend the House of Prayer

149 In my view, verse 48 of Surah Al Maidah affirms the diversity of the one believing community.
Whereas Islahi usually restricts verses to the specific context of the time of revelation, he considers these verses to be universal in their application. He does not discuss the question why many verses of the Qur’an must be understood in the light of a specific context whereas other verses may be lifted out of a specific context and given a general connotation.

Islahi makes use of Qur’anic parallels (quran ke nazair, ibid, p. 218) without considering the different context of each verse or group of verses – even after admitting that a verse can have many meanings (mukhtalif ma’ni, ibid, p. 248). A significant illustration of Islahi’s use of Qur’anic parallels is the way Islahi finds a parallel in several other Surahs for verse 41 of the present Surah, which he says points to the area around Mecca.

Despite the fact that Islahi recognizes that the Qur’an deliberately uses language suited to the culture of its audience to describe life in the next world (ahwal-i-akhirat ki ta’bir in alfaz o tamsilat se ki jati hai jo mukhatab ke liye qarib alfahtm hon, ibid, p. 234), he describes the punishment meted out to unbelievers in verses 19-21 without giving any indication that the language used in these verses may be metaphorical in kind. However, Islahi does not reject all metaphorical expressions (iste’arat, ibid, p. 243) but says they must be understood according to the changing times (ab zamana ki taraqi ne is daur mein buson, lariyon, motoron aur hawai jahazon ko bhi sharik kar dia hai, ibid, p. 243) and according to the actual context of these verses (in ayat ka siyaq is bat par dalil hai, ibid). Hence, he understands the image of abandoned wells in verse 45 as symbolic of destruction and the image of high castles in the same verse as symbolic of pomp and splendour. In short, Islahi wants to explain these metaphors and symbols according to his own perception rather than allowing the metaphors and symbols to speak for themselves.

Similarly, Islahi encourages the process of rational enquiry into the Qur’an but seems to set his own limits and conditions for this effort of rational inquiry.

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151 Parallel references to the coming conquest of Mecca by the Muslims can be found, according to Islahi, in verse 41 of Surah Al R’ad and in verse 44 of Surah Al Anbiya.

152 Islahi’s arbitrary dismissal of what he calls “Arab mythology” in his commentary on the following Surah Al Muumin (cf. ibid, p. 341) and his rejection of “Hindu mythology” (cf. ibid, p. 342) – without any effort at investigating what the term “mythology” actually means – also indicates that he is prepared to set his own preconceived limits to rational inquiry.
Surah Al Mu’minun

Introduction

The present Surah begins where the previous one left off. Surah Al Hajj ended by telling the Muslims, in verse 78, that the Prophet had been a witness of the true *din* from God for them:

so that the Apostle might bear witness to the truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind.

Now it is the Muslims’ obligation to be a witness for the whole of creation (*ye gawahi tum khalq par do*, vol. 5, p. 293). Islahi finds a subtle link between the last verses of the previous Surah and the first verses of the present one (*ek halqah ittisal*, ibid). Moreover, there is no basic difference in content between the previous Surah and the present one. The main difference is the way the Surah presents the argument (*sirf uslub-i-bayan aur nahj-i-istadlal ka farq hai*, ibid). The coming victory and well being (*fauz o falah*) of the believers and the disgrace (*zillat o namuradi*) of the unbelievers, which was announced in the previous Surah, is described more fully in this one. The believers are informed quite openly about the kind of future they can expect. Similarly, the unbelievers are told in no uncertain terms about the kind of disgrace that is in store for them. The signs are there for all to see in history, in nature and in the heavens (*afaq o anfus aur tarikh ki shahadat yahi hai*, ibid). Ultimately, falsity will succumb and the truth will prevail (*haq hi ka bol bala hoga*, ibid).

The Social Context

Instead of turning to the “occasions of revelation”, Islahi describes the social, cultural and political context in which the verses were revealed. Verse 3 says:

And who turn away from all that is frivolous.

While this verse is addressed to the believers, it contains an allusion to the idle talk of their opponents as well (*mauqa’ kalam ek aur zamani mafhum ki taraf bhi isharah kar raha hai*). wo ye ke is mein mukhalafin ki in kharafat par ek ta’riz bhi hai jo wo islam aur musalmanon ke khilaf har waqt bikte rahte they, ibid, p. 297)

Moreover, verses 12-22 are revealed in the context of the rejection by opponents of the Qur’an of any possibility of a resurrection after death (*jo log sare seakhirat hi ke qail na hon*, ibid, p. 301). Likewise, Islahi connects
verse 111 directly with the Muslims who were suffering oppression from their opponents at that time (jo is daur mein mutakbarin ke zulm aur thithak ka hadif bane hue they, ibid, p. 349):

(But,) behold, today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity: verily, it is they, they who have achieved a triumph!"

According to Islahi, the present Surah goes into far greater detail than the previous Surah about the historical conflict between the Prophets and those who opposed them (is mein fil jumlah tafsil hai, ibid, p. 308). The words of verse 25: “He is nothing but a madman” repeat what the Quraysh were saying about the Prophet (bilkul isi qism ki bat quraysh ke lidaron ne anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ke muta‘alliq kahin, ibid, p. 314). Furthermore, verse 43 also contains a warning for the Quraysh (ye quraysh ko tanbih hai, ibid, p. 320):

No community can ever forestall (the end of) its term – and neither can they delay (its coming).

Similarly, Islahi implies that verse 54 is directed to the Quraysh (ibid, p. 327):

But leave them alone, lost in their ignorance, until a (future) time.

While verse 76 does not apply to the Quraysh but to those whose way of life was similar to the Quraysh (ibid, p. 337), verses 78-79 address the Quraysh directly (abye in ko bara-i-rast mukhatab kar ke, ibid, p. 338):

(O men! Pay heed to God’s messages,) for it is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds: (yet) how seldom are you grateful!

And He it is who has caused you to multiply on earth; and unto Him you shall be gathered.

According to Islahi, all these verses express the situation of conflict that existed between the Prophet and the Quraysh.

In contrast, Islahi describes the historical context of verses 52-53 in terms of conflict within the community:

And, verily, this community of ours is one single community, since I am the Sustainer of you all: remain, then, conscious of Me!

But they (who claim to follow you) have torn their unity wide asunder, piece-by-piece, each group delighting in (but) what they themselves possess (by way of tenets).

Islahi says that verse 69 is also directed to the Quraysh (cf. ibid, p. 335).
Islahi understands these verses as stating that, instead of establishing various religious communities through the Prophets, God sought to establish a single religious community (ek hi ummat – ummat muslimah – ke qaim karne ki jiddo-jahd ki, ibid, p. 326). He understands the Prophets as having proclaimed nothing but the one religion (asal din se alag koi chiz nahin pesh ki, ibid). The Qur'an has perfected this din (us ne asal din ko . . . bilkul nikh kar) and presented it in its original form (asli surat mein pesh kar dia, ibid). The one din is present in all communities and peoples (tamam milleton aur qaumon ka asal din, ibid) but, owing to their short sightedness, these people have become engrossed in their own versions and expressions of it (lekin qaumon ne apni tang nazri aur ta'ssub ke sabab se is ki mukhalafat ki, ibid). Islahi's analysis of din reflects the way he imagines the sort of difficulties the believers were experiencing at the time of revelation.

Islahi says that the words from verse 51 are a specific allusion to the situation of conflict that the Prophet was facing:

O you Apostles! Partake of the good things of life, and do righteous deeds: verily, I have full knowledge of all that you do.

Islahi explains that the verse refers to the disagreement regarding legitimate and illegitimate food, which led some people to oppose the Prophet (apne mushrakana tawahhumat ke taht tayibat ko haram aur khabais ko halal tahraya, ibid, p. 325).

Furthermore, by showing how some verses provided consolation or encouragement for the Prophet in his difficult circumstances, Islahi is, in effect, describing the context of those verses in various ways (nabi salla allahu alayhi wa salam ke liye tasalli aur ap ke mukhalafin ke liye malamat, ibid, 336). For example, Islahi says that there is an emphasis on glad tidings in verse 95:

(Pray thus-) for, behold, We are most certainly able to let thee witness (the fulfillment, even in this world, of) whatever We promise them!

This message of hope was revealed at a time when the conditions for the Muslims were very difficult (is liye ke is daur mein abhi halat bahut namusa'id they, ibid, p. 346). Islahi goes on to explain how difficult it was to bring some light into this darkness (ye bawar karna kuch asan nahin tha ke isi tariki ke andar se 'angarib roshni paida hone wali hai, ibid).

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154 Muhammad Asad says that the verse is simply an indication of "the humanness and mortality" of the Prophets. Asad (1980), p. 524, footnote 27.

155 Islahi discusses other verses that also express consolation (tasalli) and encouragement for the Prophet. Cf. ibid, pp. 325-326 and p. 337.

156 Islahi's reference to the darkness of the situation in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) found himself contrasts with Islahi's frequent reference to the promise of victory for the Muslims.
mentioning modern Muslims specifically in relation to verses 84-85 (jis mein brl'umum ajkal ke musalman muhtmala hain, ibid, p. 340), Islahi only highlights the fact that his discussion is limited to the context that existed at the time of revelation.

Knowledge of the way of life of the Arabs contributes to an understanding of the references to the garden in verse 19 (ahl ‘arab ke han ek achhe bagh ka tasawwur, ibid, p. 306), to the cattle in verse 20 (in ka gobar bhi tumhare khaitiyon ke liye khad ka kam deta hai, ibid, p. 307) and to the means of transport mentioned in verse 21 (ahl ‘arab ke zindagi, ibid). Yet Islahi is careful to mention that these are all examples (yahan asal haqiqat par nagah rahe ke maqsud in chizon ke zikr se dars-i-‘ibarat hai, ibid). Moreover, Islahi dismisses Arab mythology (cf. ibid, p. 341) and compares it to Hindu mythology (cf. ibid, p. 342) since the pagan Arabs (mushrikin-i-‘arab, ibid, p. 340) accepted the fact of God but considered the resurrection to be only a hypothesis (mafruzah).157

Finally, Islahi sometimes describes the context by summarizing the meaning of the verses as he understands them. For example, verse 33 says:

And (every time) the great ones among his people, who refused to acknowledge the truth and gave the lie to the announcement of a life to come – (simply) because We had granted them ease and plenty in (their) worldly life, and they had become corrupted by it – (every time) they would say: “This (man) is nothing but a mortal like yourselves, eating of what you eat, and drinking of what you drink”.

Islahi seems to provide a summary or paraphrase of this verse (unhona samjha ke in ki ye dunyawi kamyabiyan in ke ‘amal aur ‘aqida ki saihat ki dalil hai, ibid, p. 318).158

Transcending the Specific Context

Islahi provides further support for his notion of coherence by formulating general concepts that have a very wide or even universal application. For example, he extends the meaning of verses 12-14 to cover the excellence of the creation of all mankind (insan ko . . . baihterin sakht aur baihterin salahiyaton ke sath paida kiya hain, ibid, p. 305). He also encompasses the

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157 The Arabs did not have a mythology. Moreover, pre-Islamic poetry bears witness that the Arabs understood their gods only as intercessors and that they both believed in a supreme God and in an after-life.

158 Further examples of the way Islahi tends to summarize verses or groups of verses can be found in ibid, p. 316, p. 337 and p. 341.
whole world in his discussion of the “truth” in verse 71 (agar ye tamam iqdaran ki khwahishon ke mutabiq talapat ho jayen to is dunya ka sara akhlaqi nizam darham burham ho jaye, ibid, p. 335), linking the discussion about “success and prosperity” in the world (is dunya ki najat o falah, ibid, p. 336) to the struggle between truth and falsity itself (haq . . . ya batal, ibid). Verse 80 clearly refers to all human beings (har insan ke liye qayamat ki yad dahani hai, ibid, p. 339)

Islahi makes sweeping generalizations that are critical of western society (maujuda magribi aur magribzada sosatti, ibid, p. 298) saying that, because there is no ban on sexual license in the West, it can be curbed only by force. These general statements support Islahi’s view that the Surah has a consistent theme and is, therefore, thematically coherent. This theme (‘umud) is presented at the beginning of the discussion (cf. p. 293) and Islahi summarizes the main points of the Surah to show that they are in keeping with the theme he has presented. For example, verse 30 says:

In this (story), behold, there are messages indeed (for those who think): for, verily, We always put (man) to a test.

This verse provides Islahi with an opportunity to summarize the abiding lesson (mustaqil dars, ibid, p. 317) of the Surah by formulating it according to four truths (haqaiq, ibid), each of which he had already introduced and explained earlier in the Surah. The four truths are:

1. God has sent his messengers to bring guidance and to promote reform (islah o hidayat, ibid, p. 317).
2. God provides people with the opportunity to reject his messengers during a certain period of time (allah ta’ala in ko dhil deta hai, ibid). When that time has passed, God intervenes (khuda in ko pakarta hai, ibid).
3. In the struggle between truth and falsity (haq o batil ki kashmakash, ibid), the Prophet and his followers will have success and prosperity (fauz o falah, ibid.) after enduring many trials.
4. Since all the Prophets brought a single message and those who opposed it used a similar approach (mukhalafin ki mukhalafat ka andaz bhi hamesha se ek hi raha hai, ibid). Hence, there is an abiding lesson in the life of every Prophet for every other Prophet and in the narrative account of any people for any other people (har ummat ki sar guzasht dusri ummat ke liye ek mustaqil dars hai, ibid).

By providing general summaries like this, Islahi intends to show how the Surah is coherent.
Islahi seeks an explanation of the way the believers will be established in this present world (*tamakan fil ard*) by looking at the situation into which the Surah was revealed. Viewing the Surah in the light of its historical context, Islahi concludes that verse 1:

Truly, to a happy state shall attain the believers (verse 1) is primarily addressed to those believers who were forced to emigrate from Mecca (ahl iman hain jo is daur mein haq ki khatir hijrat aur jihad ki baziyan khel rahe they, ibid, p. 296). However, Islahi admits that the announcement of their success (faiz almaram, ibid) and prosperity (falah) is actually a reference to life in the next world (yahan jis falah ki basharat hai is ka haqiqi sumrah to falah-i-akhirat hai, ibid) and in heaven (wohi khuda ki jinnat ke waris honge aur yahi asal kamyabi hai, ibid, p. 301). In fact, later in the Surah, Islahi links “success and prosperity” with eternal salvation (najat o falah, ibid, p. 313). Nevertheless, Islahi asserts that, included in this announcement, is a reference to the establishment of a community of believers in this world (is ke andar tamakan fil ard ki wo basharat bhi muzamar hai, ibid). Islahi explains that, since the earthly dimension of this prosperity was already alluded to in the previous Surah, the present Surah refers only to the fundamental reality of this prosperity, namely, the after-life in heaven, (is surah mein asal in'am – firdaus – ka zikr hua, ibid), which naturally includes the other dimensions (dusri chizen is ke taht khud ba khud a gayi, ibid).

Subsequent verses outline these other dimensions. The success and welfare of the believers depends firstly on the way they pray (jis par mazkurah falah ka inhisar hai, ibid). According to Islahi, verse 4:

and who are intent on inner purity refers to the “success and prosperity” that comes from a harmonious relationship between God and among people in general (jo banda khalq aur khaliq donon se sahih bunyad par marbut ho jaye, dar haqiqat wohi banda dunya aur akhirat donon ki falah ka sazawar hai, ibid, p. 297-298). In keeping with his universal approach to these verses, Islahi gives a very general interpretation to verse 8:

and who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges allowing it to cover all manner of duties and responsibilities that people take up in society (quwwaton aur salahiyaton, faraiz aur zimmadariyon ki shakl mein ya in'amat o afzal aur amwal o aulad ki surat mein hamare hawale ki hain, ibid, p. 299). Clearly, Islahi is trying to present a universal teaching by going beyond the social context of Mecca.
Looking at verses 55-61 from the point of view of the theme ('umud), Islahi says that these verses distinguish a false concept of “success and prosperity” (ya jin chizon ko kamyabiyan taisawwur kiye hue hain ye kamyabiyan nahin hain, ibid, p. 327) from the quality of true success (haqiqi kamyabiyon ke rha, ibid). Similarly, Islahi says that the last verses of the Surah, especially verses 93-94, express the imminent victory of the Prophet and his followers in this world and in the next (ab fath o nusrat ka waqt qarib hai. ahl iman kamyab o fathmand aur ap ke mukhalafin dunya o akhirat donon ki raswai se duchar honge, ibid, p. 342). The triumph referred to verse 111 is for those who remained faithful to the message of the Prophet:

(But,) behold, today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity: verily, it is they, they who have achieved a triumph!

Islahi says that the verse implies the downfall of those who ridiculed the Prophet (ya bat ap se ap nikli ke in ka mazaq urane wale namurad hue, ibid, p. 349).

Islahi seems to be grappling with the precise meaning of the concept “success and prosperity” promised to the believers in this world. He began by suggesting that those who first migrated to Medina were the ones to experience “success and prosperity”, yet subsequently he wants to extend the concept of “success and prosperity” so that it may have a more universal connotation. However, Surah Group Three seems to link “success and prosperity” overwhelmingly with life in the next world rather than with life in this world. In short, Islahi interprets the words “success and prosperity” in a way that accords with his formulation of the theme ('umud) of the Surah.

Parallel Verses

Islahi’s use of parallels (nazair, ibid, p. 347) also contributes to his argument that the Surah is coherent because he uses them to show that the same idea is repeated in different places in the Surah. Moreover, Islahi sees an argument for coherence in the fact that the present Surah ends in the way it started (nazm-i-quran ke nihayat wazeh dalail mein se hai, ibid, p. 349). Islahi seeks to strengthen his argument for the coherence of this Surah by comparing words from the first verse with words from the second-to-last verse (surah sharu' hui thi... khait ho gayi, ibid, p. 350). He ends by saying that the last verse expresses the hope, in the form of a prayer, that the believers will actually experience the victory that has been the main theme of the Surah ('umud, ibid, p. 351).
Islahi uses parallels (nazair) to support his description of the opposition which the Prophet had to face.\textsuperscript{159} I have discussed how Islahi deals with conflict within the community in the section on “the specific context”.\textsuperscript{160} Islahi finds parallel verses for his view about the original unity of the community in verses 52-53 of this Surah. He finds a further parallel to these verses in verse 213 of Surah Al Baqarah, which he quotes in full (cf. ibid, p. 326).

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi says that the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot be determined simply by knowledge of the words alone since the way the words are used must also be taken into account (in mahawarat ka mafhum mata’in karne mein alfaz ka lihaz nahin balke sirf is mafhum ka lihaz hota hai jis ke liye ye iste’mal hote hain, ibid, p. 315-316). Islahi sometimes uses a simile to convey his understanding\textsuperscript{161}. However, he describes the “anger of God” without using metaphorical language. Hence, on the one hand, Islahi refers to the bounteous generosity of God (khuda . . . ke be payan faiz, ibid, p. 304) and, on the other hand, to the “anger” of God (khuda ke qahr o ghazab, ibid, p. 313) without pointing out that God’s attributes can only be described by the use of metaphorical language. In fact, Islahi insists that, though the Surah is referring to ancient history, the anger of God remains a present reality (in ke ‘adam iman par khuda ka jo ghazab hai wo badastur baqi hai, ibid, p. 321).

Furthermore, Islahi has a physical understanding of the “lofty place” in verse 50:

And (as We exalted Moses, so, too,) We made the son of Mary and his mother a symbol (of Our grace), and provided for both an abode in a lofty place of lasting restfulness and unsullied springs.

He says that the “lofty place” refers to the physical environment provided for the son of Mary and his mother (yahan khajur ka ek musmir drakht bhi tha aur is ke niche ek saf o shafaf shirin chashma bhi, ibid, p. 322). Similarly, Islahi has a prima facie understanding for the verb khasa’ in verse 108 (translated as “Away with you”) since he is content to say that the word is used in the sense of driving away dogs (kutte ko dhatkarne ke liye ata hai,

\textsuperscript{159} Cf. ibid, p. 297, p. 314 and p. 349.
\textsuperscript{160} Cf. above, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{161} An example of his use of the simile can be found in his discussion of verse 70, cf. ibid, p. 335.
ibid, p. 348). Instead of discussing the allegorical nature of the dialogue between God and human beings in this and the final verses of the Surah (verses 109-118), Islahi approaches these verses in a logical way (ye kis tarah mumkin hai ke wo apni ra'iyyat ke darmyan 'adl o insaf na kare aur zulm o mazlum donon ko yaksan kar de, ibid, p. 350). A rational description of the way God rejects and punishes the unbelievers provides a better illustration of the thematic coherence of the Surah.

The Way of God

Islahi makes use of the concept of “the way of God” (sunnat ilahi) to move beyond the specific context and to show how the theme (‘umud) of the Surah takes effect in the history of nations. The concept explains that believers in general find “success and prosperity” and those who reject the truth experience loss (ahl iman ki falah aur haq ki takzib karne walon ka khusran, ibid, p. 308). According to this concept, the believers will undergo a trial or test (imtehan sakht, ibid, p. 328) in this world (is dunya mein ahl-i-haq ki bhi azmaish karta hai) while the unbelievers will be given sufficient time to reform themselves (dhil) before they are brought to punishment (ibid). The unbelievers tend to think that this extra time that they are given is a sign of their vindication (wo is dhil ko apni kamyabi tasawwur karte hain, ibid), whereas in reality it is leading them to destruction. Islahi limits his description to the time of revelation.

Islahi uses the same concept of “the way of God” to explain verse 77, whose last word (mublisun, broken in spirit) illustrates God’s way of dealing with rebellious nations (isi haqiqat ki taraf ayat ke akhri alfaz isharah kar rahe hai, ibid, p. 338). The same concept explains how God establishes a nation on earth when that nation accepts the message of the Prophet who has been sent to it (is qaum ko baromand karta aur zamin mein is ko iqtidar bakhshta hai, ibid, p. 334). Islahi uses the same concept to explain verse 71 (jis qaum ne is yad dahani ki qadar ki us ne faalah payi, jis ne is ki qadar na ki wo fana kar di gayi, ibid, p. 336):

But if the truth were in accord with their own likes and dislikes, the heavens and the earth would surely have fallen into ruin, and all that lives in them (would long ago have perished)!
Nay, (in this divine writ) We have conveyed unto them all that they ought to bear in mind: and from this their reminder they (heedlessly) turn away!
Associated with this concept is the idea of the completion of revelation (itimam-i-hujjat, ibid, p. 313) in order to explain that unbelievers will be destroyed only after they have rejected all efforts by God to convince them of the truth. Yet only God knows when the time for such destruction will come (khuda hi janta hai ke kab koi qaum apne akhlaqi zawal ki is had ko pahunchi, ibid, p. 320). Once again, the analysis seems to be limited to the history of the believers up to and including the appearance of the last Prophet.

162 The same concept is expressed in ibid, p. 316 and p. 317.
Conclusions

The majority of scholars say the previous Surah is Medinan while the present Surah is Meccan. Islahi says that both these Surahs are Meccan and so he can find a link (ek halqah ittisal, ibid) between them and conclude that they are thematically coherent.

Islahi says that the only main difference between these two Surahs is the way each presents the argument (sirf uslub-i-bayan aur Nahj-i-istadlal ka farq hai, ibid, p. 293)\(^{163}\). Islahi does not explain his assertion that the present Surah provides more details than the previous one (us mein fil jumlah tafsil hai, ibid, p. 308) nor does he examine what influence these styles of expression (uslub-i-bayan) have on the way the theme (‘umud) and the content of the Surah are conceived and formulated. What I am suggesting is that the way the Surah is expressed must have an influence on the way it is understood.

Islahi refers to the context in this Surah with words like: mauqa’ kalam, and zamani mafnum (ibid, p. 297). He repeats certain terms already used in Surah Al Hajj, namely: isharah and ta’riz to bring out the implications and the allusions made by the text.\(^{164}\) He also frequently describes the conditions that were peculiar to a particular period (is daur mein abhi halat bahut namusai’id they, ibid, p. 346). In addition, Islahi says that references to the “garden” in verse 19, to “cattle” in verse 20 and to “means of transport” in verse 21 are examples of the Arabic way of life and culture that help to understand the Qur’an (dars-i-‘ibrat, ibid, p. 307).\(^{165}\) In other words, one cannot understand the Qur’an without knowing the social and cultural context. Islahi does not discuss how this specific social and cultural context relates to the universal meaning of the Qur’an.

However, Islahi does attempt to transcend the specific context with his references to the struggle between truth and falsity involving all mankind (har insan ke liye, ibid, p. 339), the whole world (is dunya ka sara akhlaqi nizam, ibid, p. 335) and the salvation of the whole world (is dunya ki najat o

\(^{163}\) Islahi uses a very similar expression in his commentary on Surah Maryam to indicate the difference in the flow of thought and expression (tariq-i-istadlal aur Nahj bayan mein farq hai, vol. 4, p. 629).

\(^{164}\) Islahi uses the terms isharah and ta’riz in his commentary on Surah Al Hajj. Cf. vol. 5, p. 238 and p. 242 (respectively).

\(^{165}\) It is questionable whether the concept of “garden” was part of the Arabic social or cultural life. Islahi himself describes the area around Mecca as rocky and infertile (ek wadi ghair zi zar’ mein, vol. 4, p. 328).
Islahi also makes sweeping generalizations about western society (maujuda magribi aur magribzada sosaiti, ibid, p. 298). In making these generalizations, however, Islahi is preoccupied with his argument that the Surah has a consistent theme and is, therefore, thematically coherent.

Furthermore, Islahi summarizes in four points the “messages for those who think” in verse 30, thereby claiming to provide the abiding lesson (mustaqil dars, ibid, p. 317) and the truths (haqaiq, ibid) contained in the Surah. Islahi does not consider the possibility that other messages may also be contained in verse 30. He claims that his summary expresses the message of the whole Surah and demonstrates its thematic coherence. Islahi makes summaries of other Surahs in a similar fashion.

Islahi says that the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot be determined simply by knowledge of the words themselves but that one must take into account the way the words are used (jis ke liye ye iste’mal hote hain, ibid, p. 316). However, Islahi understands many expressions in the Qur’an in a physical, prima facie way. It is questionable whether the words of the Surah were originally used in the rational, logical way that Islahi understands them in his commentary. Moreover, he does not consider whether the way words are used in the modern world has any significance for the way we understand the Qur’an today.

Islahi accepts the fact that the Surah relates history only with the specific purpose of conveying some truth (maqsud is se tarikh ki roshni mein is haqiqat ko wazeh karna hai jo yahan zer-i-bahs hai, ibid, p. 308). The purpose of an historical narrative becomes clear when it is linked to a subsequent event in history. For example, Islahi links the account of the prayer of the Prophet Noah in verses 28-29 with the prayer of the last Prophet (peace be upon him) at the time of the migration (hamare hazur ne bhi hijrat ke waqt isi tarah ki dua farmai thiy, ibid, p. 316). Similarly, the life of the Prophet Joseph is a mirror by which to understand the life of the last Prophet (peace be upon him).166 Islahi gives many examples in his commentary of the way in which one historical period throws light on

\footnote{166 I mentioned in my discussion of Surah Yusuf that the time of revelation of this Surah would not have made it possible for the last Prophet (peace be upon him) to see Surah Yusuf as a mirror of his own experiences.}
another. He could have investigated how the historical narratives function as mirrors for subsequent periods of history right up to the present.

Moreover, Islahi says that a nation has success when it is morally responsible and declines when it loses this sense of moral responsibility (jis qaum ne is yad dahani ki qadar ki us ne faalah payi, jis ne is ki qadar na ki wo fana kar di gayi, ibid, p. 336). The uses the concept of sunnat-i-ilahi and the concept of ittam-i-hujjat to explain how this works in practice. It seems to me that this theory of the rise and fall of nations depends on a vision of faith whereas Islahi uses abstract concepts to explain it on the basis of reason.

Finally, parallel verses (nazair, ibid, p. 347) help to illustrate the coherence of the Surah. Islahi sees an argument for coherence in the fact that the Surah ends in the way it started (nazm-i-quran ke nihayat wazeh dalail mein se hai, ibid, p. 349).
Surah An Nur

Introduction

This Medinan Surah is the last of Surah Group Three. Islahi says it forms a supplement and an appendix (takmilah aur tatimmah, vol. 5, ibid, p. 355) to the previous Surah, though he had used the same words about the previous Surah as well (cf. ibid, p. 293). Since it seems to be part of the previous Surah (goya sabiq surah hi ka juzu hoti hai, ibid, p. 355), Islahi says that this Surah is not the first of another, separate pair of Surahs. While the Muslims were in Mecca, they could not experience any form of social organization (ijtama’i tanzim, ibid) but had to live their faith as individuals. After the migration, when they had gathered in Medina and had formed social and political structures, their faith came under the impact of these social and political realities. In this new and favorable environment, laws and regulations were revealed explicitly for the reform and purification of society (mu’sharah ki islah o tathir, ibid). Consequently, the light of faith, which until this time could be reflected only in the life of an individual, found a new means of expression and became visible through social organization (haiyat-i-ijtama’i par zufagun hui, ibid).

The special character of this Surah is that it was revealed to enlighten the believers about laws and regulations required by the specific circumstances of the period (waqt ke khas halat ke mutabiq, ibid). For it was necessary both to enlighten the believers about the demands of a life of faith lived in their new social circumstances (nau tashkil mu’sharah, ibid) as well as to protect them from those elements that were working to destroy it.

The Theme of the Surah

Islahi refers to the theme (‘umud) in the context of verse 23:

Those who (falsely, and without repentance,) accuse chaste women who may have been unthinkingly careless but have remained true to their faith, shall be rejected (from God’s grace) in this world as well as in the life to come.

This verse refers to the punishment that those people, who falsely accuse chaste women, will experience in this world and in the next (dunya mein bhi ‘angarib in ki jar kat ke rahegi aur akhirat mein to in ke bahr hal ‘azab-i-‘azim hai hi, ibid, p. 389). In fact, Islahi finds an allusion to the victory of Islam in this verse (in munafikin par allah ta’ala ki is la’nat ka asr hilakhir
ye zahir hua ke islam ke ghalba ne in ka aur in ke sar ghanun ka sar zamin-
i-‘arab se yakqalm khatama kar dia, ibid). However, the rest of his
discussion is concerned only with the Last Day (is din in ki zabane, in ke
hath paun khud in ke khilaf gawahi denge, ibid) whereas the victory of Islam
occurs, according to Islahi, both in the present world and in the next world.

Islahi displays a similar ambiguity with regard to the phrase in verse 31:
And (always), O you believers - all of you - turn unto God in
repentance, so that you might attain to a happy state!
He says that the phrase is addressed to the whole Muslim community (sab ko
khitab kar ke, ibid, p. 399) and exhorts them to adopt the way that the
Qur’an has recommended since this is the way to success and happiness
(yahi rasta fauz o falah ka rasta hai, ibid). But Islahi does not clarify the
nature of this “happy state” any further, except to give a cross-reference to a
similar expression in verse 77 of Surah Al Hajj: “so that you may attain to a
happy state!” and to the opening phrase of Surah Al Muminun: “Truly, to a
happy state shall attain the believers”. Islahi is content to understand these
expressions as indicating the victory of Islam in this world and the actual
situation of prosperity that is promised to the believers in this life (is
tumakan fil ard ki salahiyat, ibid, p. 288).

According to Islahi, the verse that further clarifies the actual situation of the
believers in this world is verse 55 of this Surah:
God has promised those of you who have attained to faith and do
righteous deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to
power on earth, even as He caused (some of) those who lived before
them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish
for them the religion which He has been pleased to bestow on them;
and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be
replaced by a sense of security – (seeing that) they worship Me
(alone), not ascribing divine powers to aught beside Me.

Islahi begins his discussion by referring to verses from other Surahs that
came earlier in this Surah Group, namely, verses from Surah Al Anbiya,
Surah Al Hajj and Surah Al Muminun (ibid, p. 426). According to Islahi, all
the verses alluded to in these Surahs claim victory for the Prophets in this
world (is dunya mein ghalba lazmi hai, ibid) and state that those who
believed in the Prophets assumed leadership in society (qayadat o siyadat,
ibid, p. 427).
Furthermore, the religion of Islam will be established in this land (is din ko is sar zamin mein mutamakkan karega, ibid) and the laws of Islam (din) will be implemented in it (is din ka qanun is mulk mein chalega, ibid). Moreover, the political system will be that of Islam (isi ki asasat par is mulk ka nizam-i-ijtim'İ o siyasi ustuwar hoga, ibid) and no other religion will have power or authority in this country (is din ke siwa kisi aur din ka iqtitdar is mulk mein baqi nahin rahega, ibid). The time will soon come (jald wo waqt ane wala hai, ibid) when God will replace fear with a state of security and no one will be able to endanger the religion of God any further (allah ke din, ibid). Islahi states that all these promises of God were fulfilled with the victory of Islam in Mecca (fath makka, ibid) when the Prophet announced that there would be no other religion in the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. There is no doubt about the success of the believers both in this world and in the next (tum dunya aur akhirat donon mein faiz almaram hoge, ibid).

Finally, we should note that Islahi also uses the concept of “the way of God” (summat ilahi) to explain how success comes to the believers (cf. ibid, p. 426). As we have seen, this concept is frequently used in the earlier Surahs of this Surah Group. Islahi says repeatedly that victory or defeat comes only after the Prophets have accomplished their mission to present the message of God completely and convincingly (itmam-i-hujjat ke ba'd, ibid).

The Social Context

Islahi begins by specifying the social context of verse 2: As for the adulteress and the adulterer – flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion with them keep you from (carrying out) this law of God, if you (truly) believe in God and the Last Day; and let a group of the believers witness their chastisement. Since the Jews implemented the law against adultery only in the case of a poor person, while the rich were not punished (koi amir is ka irtikah karta to is se ta'riz na karte, ibid, p. 362), the Qur'an had to clarify and to stress the nature of this punishment (hudud ke mu'malah mein is shad ke satth takid o tanbih ki zarurat is wajh se thi, ibid). Islahi states that adultery destroys social life (mu'sharah ke intishar o fasad mein sab se ziyadah dakhil zina ko hai, ibid, p. 361) and explains that all religions consider it to be a punishable crime (cf. ibid, p. 362). Islam also took steps to contain the evil effects of this social sin through the laws that were revealed in this Surah when the

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167 In fact, this applies only to the law of stoning. The Jews did flog every person who committed adultery.
circumstances demanded it. These circumstances are mentioned also in verses 15-16 of Surah An Nisa. Islahi discusses verse 2 in relation with the opinions of the early jurists of Islam, as we shall see in the section below called “Islamic society and government”.

Subsequently, Islahi describes the social and political context for verse 10 and the verses following it. He says that verse 10 was revealed because the Muslims were experiencing significant weaknesses (sakht qism ki kamzauryan) caused by the machinations of a group of people he calls the hypocrites (munafikin, ibid, p. 377). Regarding the following verses, Islahi explains that a section of the Muslim community was being influenced by certain people who were spreading false rumors in order to discredit the moral character of the Muslims (musalmanon ki akhlaqi sakh ukar dene ke darpe hain, ibid, p. 378). Islahi makes explicit reference to hazrat ‘aisha, about whom the accusations were being made (cf. ibid, p. 381) and to a certain person who was the ringleader of those spreading the rumors (ye ishara ‘abad allah bin ubay ki taraf hat, ibid, p. 383). He mentions that the Jews were irritated at the prestige in which the Muslims were held by their foes (yahud par ye bat bahut shaq thiy ke musalmanon ki akhlaqi bartari ki dhak in ke mukhalafon ke dilon par bhi baitati ja rahi hai, ibid, p. 386). Islahi is of the view that the state of the Jews was worse than that of the Arabs before the coming of Islam (yahud ka hal, ahl kitab hone ke bawajud, in se bhi ziyadah bura tha, ibid) and that the emergence of this new community of Muslims (pakiza mu’sharah, ibid) provoked the Jews to plot revenge (intiqam lene ki tadbir, ibid).

The next section of verses (27-34) relates to the custom in pre-Islamic society (zamana jahiliyat ki sosaiti mein, ibid, p. 390) of free access to one another’s houses. These verses also make certain stipulations regarding the marriage of widows and of slaves since this was necessary in the new circumstances (sosaiti mein, ibid). There are also verses relating to the freedom of slaves (ghulamon ki azadi, ibid). Verse 32 says:

And you ought to marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are fit (for marriage)

In response, Islahi refers to social customs, prevalent at that time, which needed reform (mu’sharah ke andar in ki islah, ibid, p. 400). It is for this reason that the Qur’an offers guidance of a social nature (quran ne mu’sharah ko hidayat farmai, ibid). Islahi sees the emancipation of slaves as a gradual social process (wo biltadrij mu’sharah ke salah ajazai ban jayenge, ibid) and offers his own opinions (mere nazdik, ibid, p. 401) about
the way society should relate to slaves. It is clear that Islahi is referring to Islamic society of that period (islahat ke is daur mein is raujhan ka paida hona ek qudrati amr tha, ibid, p. 403). He refers to the way Islam has decreed (islam ne zina par had jari karne ka hukm di dia, ibid) and draws our attention to the Islamic character of the period (islam ke daur mein, ibid). Hence it is clear that Islahi is describing the context of Islamic history and discovers the meaning of the Surah in the light of that context (is roshni mein).

As regards the group of verses 41-57, Islahi describes the situation created by those people who, at that time (is daur mein, ibid, p. 422), approached whatever law courts that suited them, whether it be courts which operated according to Islamic law (islam ke qanun ka faislah) or Jewish courts (yahud ki 'adalaton mein, ibid, p. 423). Islahi says that the doubt referred to in verse 50:

Or have they begun to doubt (that there is a divine writ)?

arose out of the situation of conflict between the Muslims and their opponents, which was going on at that time (jo kashmakash is waqt barpa hai, ibid).

For the last section of verses 57-64, Islahi describes the social context as the background to clarify the permissions granted in verse 61. He says the verse is a response to some people living at that time who may have thought Islam was advocating all kinds of restrictions for social intercourse (kuch logon ne ye mahsus kiya ke islam soshyal azadion ko mahdud karna chahta hai, ibid, p. 433). People with infirmities may have had the same impression. The verse seeks to dismiss such false impressions (is tarah ke logon ke shubah ko dur karne ke liye, ibid). Islahi has interpreted the verse in terms of the questions he thinks people were asking as a result of the restrictions the Qur'an had put on social intercourse.

In this Surah, Islahi also makes reference to the social context of contemporary society. He accuses the modern world of not respecting the Islamic sensitivities contained in verse 3, which concerns the nature of adultery (lekin bahut taure log ab aisi rah gaye hain jo mu'malah ke is pahlu ko nigah mein rakhne hon jis ki taraf ayat mein rahnumai farmai gayi hai, ibid, p. 375). Furthermore, Islahi describes the modern tendency to promote rumors in newspapers and journals as an illustration of what verse 12 seeks to prevent (cf ibid, p. 384). Similarly, with reference to verse 30, Islahi laments the influence of modern fashion (is zamane mein fashyon ke...
shauq, ibid, p. 396). Again, Islahi rejects the modern view that Islamic dress code for women has become obsolete (cf. ibid, p. 397). Finally, Islahi says that Islam rejects the contemporary trend of making a display of one’s ornaments (maujuda zamane ki mutabarrijat ki tarah har jaga apni zinat ki numaish karte phirna islam mein jaiz nahin hai, ibid, p. 399). In these particular instances, Islahi has found a modern social context in which to understand the Surah.

In this Surah more than in any other of this Surah Group, Islahi refers to the modern world or to contemporary society in order to bring out the meaning contained in the text. Islahi explains that, just as the rich people among the Jews used to finds ways of avoiding punishment by stoning (cf. ibid, p. 362), similarly in today’s world there is a misguided way of thinking by which people find psychological excuses for crimes (ab maujuda zamane mein to ye mustaqlil falsafa ban gaya hai ke jo log jaraim ka irtikab karte hain wo kisi zahni bimari ke sabab se karte hain, ibid). This wrong way of thinking makes it possible for them to abolish punishment and to replace it with other methods of reform. Islahi remarks that one has only to open one’s eyes to see that such a misguided way of thinking is the reason why modern society is full of thieves and adulterers (ap apne hi mulk ko lijiye, ibid). One has only to look at the morning papers to realize how corrupt society is (in ki khabaren har subah ko akhbaron mein par par kar kalija shaq hota hai, ibid, p.363). It is clear that, in these remarks, Islahi has allowed the context of modern society to influence his understanding of the Surah.

Different Kinds of Language

Verse 3 alludes to a similarity between the person who engages in adultery and the person who accords to his or her own lust a place that should be reserved for God. This is, in effect, to be guilty of shirk. Islahi points out the special linguistic style used here by saying that the verse recognizes a common element between the ethical depravity of adultery and that of attributing partners to God (zina isi tarah ki akhlaqi najasat hai jis tarah ki ‘aqaidi najasat shirk hai, ibid, p. 375). However, the specific meaning of shirk is religious impurity and it cannot be compared with moral depravity in this way.

Ishahi states that the purpose of presenting the parables contained in verses 35-40 is to instruct the believers to let the light of faith shine into every part of their lives (maqsad in tamsilon ke pesh karne se ahl iman par ye wazeh karna hai ke wo apni zindagi ke har goshe ko iman ki nuraniyat se
munawwar karen, ibid, p. 406). These parables contain a corresponding lesson for the unbelievers. Islahi says that the best way of giving expression to truths (haqaiq) is by means of a parable (tamsilen haqaiq ko wazeh karne ka sab se 'ala aur karigar zare'a hoti hain, ibid, p. 411). Yet he analyzes several aspects of the parable of light, related in verse 35, by explaining words or concepts in a material or physical way, thereby disregarding the characteristic way a parable expresses truth, namely, through symbols or stories.

As an illustration, let us take verse 35 of the Surah:

A blessed tree – an olive-tree that is neither of the east nor of the west. The material or physical nature of Islahi's interpretation consists in his explanation that the tree is so blessed precisely because it is not in the corner of the garden where it would be exposed to the heat of the sun, causing it to produce less fruit (bagh ke kinaron ke drakht bilkhasus jo mashriq ya magrib mein hun hamesha dhup aur hawa ki zad mein hone ke sabab se itne achhe phal nahin dete they, ibid, p. 410). The tree in the center of the garden produces more fruit because it is sheltered from the heat. This is a scientific explanation using scientific language rather than an explanation based on the symbolic language of the parable. Besides, horticultural science would argue that a tree's fruitfulness is proportion to the sunlight it receives.

Furthermore, Islahi alludes to the debates between the Jews and the Christians about the direction of prayer (in alfaz mein ek latif talmih yahud o nisara ki is naz' ke tarif bhi hai jo qibla ke ta'alluq se in ke mabain, mushriq o magrib ke bab mein, barpa hui, ibid, p. 411). Referring to a link between verse 35 of the present Surah and the words from verse 142 of Surah Al Baqarah: “God's is the east and the west”, Islahi claims that these debates of the Jews and the Christians led to their being excluded from membership in the “community of the middle way” mentioned in verse 143 of Surah Al Baqarah, and from the possibility of their ever enjoying the benefits of Islam (wo asl muqta wasat se itne dur ho gaye ke hamesha ke liye ummat-i-wasat ke sharaf se mohrum ho gaye aur qabul-i-islam ki sa'dat in ko hasil na ho saki, ibid). Islahi's conclusion about the exclusion of the Jews and the Christians from the “community of the middle way” is based on a misunderstanding of these verses, which intend to convey the fact that

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168 I have found no external evidence to confirm Islahi's statement that the Jews and the Christians were engaged in a debate over the direction of prayer.
the direction (whether it is to the east or to the west) is irrelevant. Accordingly, verse 142 of Surah Al Baqarah says that the guidance of God can be found in every place and in every direction:

Say: “God’s is the east and the west; He guides whom He wills onto a straight way.”

Similarly, verse 35 of Surah An Nur has the same stress on the blessing of God:

(a lamp) lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west.

Furthermore, Islahi interprets verse 36 in a figurative way:

In the houses (of worship) which God has allowed to be raised so that His name be remembered in them, there (are such as) extol His limitless glory at morn and evening.

Islahi says that these houses of worship are a symbol of the hearts of the faithful (tamsil mein zahir hai ke mishkat se murad qalb-i-salim ya balfaz digar qalb mumin hai, ibid, p. 411). In contrast to the figurative use of language in the above verse, Islahi describes the actual, physical houses of worship that have been erected directly with God’s permission (agarche yahan alfaz ‘am hain in ke aulin masdaq wo ma’bad hain jo barai-rast allah ta’ala ke hukm se qaim hue, ibid, p. 412). In describing these actual houses of worship, Islahi is using language in a physical or material sense.

Finally, Islahi has an interesting remark with regard to the lesson referred to in verse 44:

It is God who causes night and day to alternate: in this (too), behold, there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see!

Islahi says that the verse urges the reader to recognize the inner in the outer and the whole in the part (jo log wo nazr rakhte hain jo zahir ke andar batin aur juziyat ke andar kuliyat, ibid, p. 421), thereby leading to the obvious conclusion that the universe must be the work of a wise and all-powerful being (ye kainat ek khudae hakim o qadir ki banai hui hai, ibid). However, though the “nakedness” referred to in verse 58, for example, could be understood both in a prima facie sense as well as figuratively, Islahi does not investigate the possibility that the verse has figurative implications (cf. ibid, p. 431-432). Islahi opts for the literal, material understanding of the word “nakedness” in this verse.
Islamic Society and Government

Islahi portrays Islamic society in an ideal way, saying that there is no evidence of theft, adultery and banditry in Islamic societies today (wahan na jaraim ka wujud hai na mujrimon ka. ye sirf islami hudud o ta'zirat ka dibdabah hai ke wahan na churi aur zina ke waqe'at hote hain, ibid, p. 363). Islahi compares Islamic societies with modern society and is reminded of Christ’s words: “you have made my Father’s house into a den of thieves” (ibid). Islahi proceeds to list the conditions that the Islamic jurists (hamare fuqaha, ibid, p. 364) laid down for the implementation of Islamic punishments. From these conditions, the reader gets an impression of the kind of Islamic society that Islahi envisages. He lists the following conditions:

1. The first condition for these punishments is that only an Islamic government can implement them (darul islam ya bilfaz digar islami hukumat ka hona zaruri hai, ibid). Islahi says that these laws were revealed during the Islamic government in Medina.

2. The second condition is that only people who have reached maturity can undergo these punishments. Moreover, mentally challenged persons cannot be punished according to these ways.

3. The third condition is that slaves can receive these punishments only in a modified way.

4. Some jurists have held that these punishments can be administered only to Muslims. But Islahi is of the view that non-Muslims cannot be excluded from these punishments since justice and social security demand such punishments. Not to cut off the hands of non-Muslim thieves would only provide an opportunity for theft (ghair musalmanon ko churi ka laisenz de rahi hai, ibid). The Prophet and the ancestors (khalfae rashidin) support this view (ibid).

5. All the jurists agree that these punishments apply only to those not yet married. The problem arises with regard to what punishment should be given to those already married. After a lengthy discussion concerning the views of the jurists, Islahi concludes that the right punishment for adulterers who are married is that of stoning (rajm ka makhaz quran mein kiya hai, ibid, p. 365). It is Islahi’s responsibility to find the basis for it in the Qur’an (main quran se is saza ka makhaz aur is ka mauqa’ o mahal wazeh karna apni ek zimmadari samajhta hun, ibid, p. 367). Islahi does this by drawing on verses 33-34 of
Surah Al Maidah, which allows the punishment of flogging to be commuted to death by stoning (rajm ki saza az rue surah maidah dene ka ikhtiyar rakhti hai, ibid, p. 374). The purpose of these laws was for the benefit of Muslim society in Medina (maqsud muslim mu’sharah ki husn-i-imi ko baidar karna hai, ibid). Subsequent verses of the Surah are also viewed in the light of the context of Muslim society, as it existed in Medina. Islahi argues that the Qur’an came to reform that society (zahir hai ke is tarah ki kharabyon ki islah is waqt tak nahi ho sakti jab tak mu’sharah ke andar in ki islah ka ihsas na paida ho. is wajh se quran ne mu’sharah ko hidayat farmai, ibid, p. 400). He refers to the basic ethical principle that should exist in Islamic society (islami mu’sharah ke isi akhlaqi usul, ibid, p. 383). Verse 14 is a warning for Muslims (musalmanon ko tanbih hai, ibid, p. 384) and verse 15 contains advice for Muslims (is ayat mein musalmanon ko is khatrah se agah kiya gaya hai, ibid, p. 385). Similarly, verse 21 is advice for Muslims (ye musalmanon ko is tarah tanbih hai, ibid, p. 387) and verse 31 is addressed to the whole of Islamic society (pure muslim mu’sharah ki islah o tathir ke liye di gayi hai is wajh se sab ko khitab kar ke, ibid, p. 399). Similarly, Islahi constantly refers to the whole of Islamic society in his discussion of verses 32-33 (cf. ibid, pp. 400-403). Yet he understands all these verses from the point of view of Islamic society, as it existed in Medina.
Conclusions

Islahi says that the present Surah provides a supplement and an appendix (takmilah aur tatimah, ibid, p. 355) to the previous Surah. It is not clear how Surah An Nur, which is a Medinan Surah, could be a supplement for Surah Al Mumimm, which is a Meccan Surah revealed in different circumstances. Besides, Surah Al Muminun discusses very general topics whereas Surah An Nur deals with more specific topics such as the hudud punishments.

Furthermore, Islahi also says in his introduction that while the Muslims were in Mecca they could not experience any form of social organization (ijtama'i tanzim, ibid) but had to live their faith as individuals. He claims that laws and regulations were revealed only in Medina for the purpose of social organization and reform. Such an assertion disregards the fact that the Muslims experienced social cohesion as a separate community in Mecca and were considered as such by the Quraysh. Already in Mecca, the Muslims had their own laws for marriage and inheritance, murder, adultery and the use of alcohol. Even Islahi acknowledges that they were a separate community because they had their own direction for prayer (qibla). In fact, in Mecca, the Muslims enjoyed every form of social organization except in matters related to power and politics.

Besides, it is incorrect to say that the Jews could approach either the Islamic or the Jewish law courts (yahud ki 'adalaton mein, ibid, p. 423). In fact, all members of Islamic society in Medina came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) for the final verdict. The Constitution of Medina makes this quite clear.169

Islahi’s claim that all other religions were excluded from the land of Arabia does not take account of the fact that other religious groups were well respected in Arabia for several hundred years after the advent of Islam. Islahi’s view seems to be based on a misunderstanding of a hadith to this effect. He should have clarified that, after the conquest of Mecca, there would be only one political power in the land.

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169 “Whenever among the people of this document there occurs any incident (disturbance) or quarrel from which disaster for it (the people) is to be feared, it is to be referred to God and to Muhammad, the Messenger of God (God bless and preserve him).” Watt (1968), p. 224, no. 42.
Islahi explains that the “blessed tree” of verse 35 is fruitful because it is sheltered from the heat of the sun. This is a scientific explanation that neither appreciates the symbolic character of the parable nor recognizes the fact that trees need sunlight. Islahi also finds a link between verse 35 of this Surah and verses 142-143 of Surah Al Baqarah, confirming his view that the Jews and the Christians were excluded from membership of the “community of the middle way” (cf. ibid, p. 411). The reference to direction in these verses, however, is precisely to emphasize the fact that the quality of a tree does not depend on the direction in which it is facing. God’s guidance is for everyone as verse 142 of Surah Al Baqarah says:

Say: “God’s is the east and the west; He guides whom He wills onto a straight way”.

Islahi has tried to find specific meanings for these verses that totally miss the point.

Based on several verses of this Surah but more especially on his understanding of verse 55, Islahi stresses the victory of Islam in this world and the prosperity that is promised to believers in this life (is dunya mein ghalba lazmi hai, ibid, p. 426). He gives explicit mention to political leadership as well as to the laws, political system and security implied by the victory of Islam in Mecca (fath makka, ibid, p.427). It is not clear how Islahi derives all these details from the text of the Surah itself.

Islahi refers to the context – external to the Surah – by using phrases such as: waqt ke khas halat ke mutabiq (ibid, p. 355), ab mayjuda zamane mein (ibid, p. 362), mauqa’ o mahal (ibid, p. 367), zamana jahiliyat ki sosaii mein (ibid, p. 390) and islam ke daur mein (ibid, p. 403). He also says that verse 35 of this Surah is an allusion to the debates of the Jews and the Christians over the direction of prayer (in alfaz mein ek laiif lalmih, ibid, p. 411) but does not provide objective evidence for this observation. In fact, all his references to the external context are derived from his own perception of the text itself.

Islahi describes the machinations of the hypocrites (munafikin) and the Jews (yahud ka hal) and claims that their state was worse than that of the Arabs before the coming of Islam. On the contrary, one could argue the state of the unbelieving Arabs in pre-Islamic society was far worse than that of the Jews. Moreover, there is no evidence for Islahi’s claim that these machinations caused weaknesses among the Muslims (sakht qism ki kamzauryan, ibid, p. 377) or for his view that the Jews were irritated by the Muslims’ prestige (yahud par ye bat bahut shaq thi, ibid, p. 386) so that they began to plot...
revenge (intiqam lene ki tadbir, ibid). All these observations are based on Islahi’s own intuitive perception about the state of affairs during the time of revelation.

Islahi devotes a disproportionate amount of space (13 pages) to discussing verse 2 of the present Surah. Punishment for the adulterer and adulteress is obviously a topic of great importance to him. He does not clarify that it was the punishment of stoning (rajm) that the Jews implemented only against a poor person for they did perform flogging on every person who committed adultery. It is in the course of this discussion that Islahi quotes two complete paragraphs from what he had written in relation to verses 33-34 of Surah Al Maidah (vol. 2, pp. 368-369). Ultimately, Islahi argues that the punishment stipulated by verse 2 of Surah An Nur is warranted because of the social disorder caused by adultery. He also says that verse 33 of Surah Al Maidah had already justified such punishment.

Islahi quotes several ahadith and traditions that support his view about punishment for adulterers (cf. vol. 5, p. 366-373). It is remarkable that Islahi provides so many ahadith to confirm his views on adultery since it is not his custom to make much use of the ahadith in his commentary. The only further reference to traditions of any kind in this Surah occurs in his discussion of verse 33, which concerns marriage and slavery. In that context, he refers to several other traditions (riwayat, cf. ibid, p. 402 and ahadith, cf. ibid, p. 403).

Furthermore, in this Surah, Islahi makes reference to modern ways of thinking (ab maujuda zamane mein to ye mustaqil falsafa ban gaya hai, ibid, p. 362. He comments on a number of issues such as adultery, the media, fashion, Islamic Dress Code for women, modern displays of jewelry and Islamic punishments. Islahi is very critical of his own country (ap apne hi mulk ko lijiye, ibid). In these comments, Islahi has become a commentator on modern life rather than an exegete of the Qur’an.

Finally, Islahi idealizes Islamic society as it was in Medina and sees it as a blue print for all Islamic societies. Hence, verse 31 is addressed to the

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170 Islahi does not show the same concern that Abdullah Saeed does to explain these punishments in a contemporary context. Saeed says that “the measure itself, whether amputation, flogging or execution, does not appear to be the primary objective of the Qur’an in relation to these crimes. What is more important from its point of view is avoidance of the crime in the first place, and then repentance if a crime is committed.” Saeed (2006), p. 136. Saeed goes on to say that, even at the time of the Companions, “there was some scope for ijihad in applying the Qur’anic injunctions on hadd.” Ibid.
whole of Islamic society (pure muslim mu'sharah ki islah o tathir ke liye di gayi hai is wajh se sab ko khitab kar ke, ibid, p. 399). Islahi seems to be saying that the verse can be understood and applied by all Muslims of every period and culture without further considerations. Furthermore, in the five conditions Islahi lays down for the implementation of Islamic punishments, his reflections move from the particular situation of Medina to the present time, without making any allowances for changes that may have occurred in the social, political and cultural context.

171 Similarly, Islahi constantly refers to the whole of Islamic society in his discussion of verses 32-33 (cf. ibid, pp. 400-403).

172 Islahi makes similar general statements about Islam and Muslims in Surah Al Hajj. Cf. my conclusions.