The chiastic structures of Sūrat al-Yāsīn, Sūrat az-Zukhruf, Sūrat al-Qalam, Sūrat al-Luqmān, Sūrat al-Fāṭir, and Sūrat al-Qāf

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Abstract

Chiastic structures are an important feature of the form and composition of the Qur'an. Previous studies identified chiastic structures that span the length of an entire sura in suras such as *al-Baqara*, *al-Yūsuf*, *al-Burūj*, and *al-Mā'idah*. Here, I propose tentative chiastic structures in the following six suras: *al-Yāsīn*, *az-Zukhruf*, *al-Qalam*, *al-Luqmān*, *al-Fāṭir*, and *al-Qāf*. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to add these six suras to the growing list of those chiastic structures that span the length of an entire sura. Identification of chiastic structures at the sura level may contribute to our understanding of suras as coherent units, and may also reveal intratextual connections of exegetical value.

Introduction

Chiasm, concentricism, and parallelism are important features of the form and composition of the Qur'an.¹ Chiastic structures can span the length of a single verse or even an entire sura. For instance, the 'Throne Verse' or *Āyat al-Kursī* (Q. 2:255) is an example of a chiastic structure at the level of a single verse; the theme of fatigue occurs in the beginning and in the end of the verse, and mention of 'the heavens and the earth' occurs after the beginning and before the end of the verse.² Previous studies have identified chiastic structures spanning the length of an entire sura in the suras of *al-Baqara*,³ *al-Yūsuf*,⁴ *al-Burūj*,⁵ *al-Mā'idah*,⁶ and other suras. In the following brief analyses, I propose tentative chiastic structures at the sura level in the following six suras: *al-Yāsīn*, *az-Zukhruf*, *al-Qalam*, *al-Luqmān*, *al-Fāṭir*, and *al-Qāf*. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to add these six suras to the growing list of chiastic structures at the sura level.

Chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Yāsīn*

The chiastic structures identified in this study tend not to divide the suras into contiguous sections with precise boundaries; instead, only the conspicuous repetition of a theme (often reinforced by the repetition of a consonantal root or even an entire phrase) in a chiastic order (e.g. theme A at the beginning and end of the sura, theme B shortly after the beginning and shortly before the end of the sura, etc.) forms the basis of these chiastic structures. With this in mind, the chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Yāsīn* can be presented as six themes, each theme with a representative verse or set of verses from the first half of the structure and a mirroring of that representative in the second half: 'Reviving the dead' (verse 12 in section A mirrored by verse 79 in section A'), 'Comparisons' (verse 13 in section B mirrored by verse 78 in section B'), 'Taking

unhelpful gods besides God’ (verse 23 in section C mirrored by verses 74–5 in section C’), ‘Being told by God to enter paradise or hell’ (verse 26 in section D mirrored by verses 63–4 in section D’), ‘Fruits’ (verse 35 in section E mirrored by verse 57 in section E’), and ‘*Azwāj*’ (verse 36 in section F mirrored by verse 56 in section F’); this theme of duality is also perhaps coincidentally reflected by the sura number and the verse number of section F, i.e. 36:36).

Perhaps the chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Yāsīn* is concentric; verse 45, located in the very center of the structure (between sections F and F’), summarizes the overarching themes of the sura: taking heed from the fates of past nations (e.g. verse 29) and being wary of the upcoming retributions if that heed is not taken (e.g. verses 49, 63, and 66). Furthermore, the verse contains a subtle indication of being at a center; the mention of ‘before and after’ parallels the concentric center (‘He knows what is before them and what is after them’) of the Throne Verse (Q. 2:255).

Chiastic structure of *Sūrat az-Zukhruf*

The chiastic structure of *Sūrat az-Zukhruf* can be presented as five themes: ‘If you ask them, they will acknowledge God’ (verse 9 in section A mirrored by verse 87 in section A’), ‘The earth and the sky’ (verses 10–1 in section B mirrored by verse 84 in section B’), ‘God’s offspring’ (verse 16 in section C mirrored by verse 81 in section C’), ‘Devils barring’ (verses 36–7 in section D mirrored by verse 62 in section D’), and ‘Angels’ (verse 53 in section E mirrored by verse 60 in section E’).

Chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Qalam*

The chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Qalam* can be presented as five themes: ‘The Prophet’s sanity’ (verse 2 in section A mirrored by verse 51 in section A’), ‘Reward for the Prophet’ (verse 3 in section B mirrored by verse 46 in section B’), ‘Deniers’ (verse 8 in section C mirrored by verse 44 in section C’), ‘Pledges’ (verse 10 in section D mirrored by verse 39 in section D’), and ‘Gardens’ (verse 17 in section E mirrored by verse 34 in section E’).

Chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Luqmān*

The chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Luqmān* can be presented as five themes: ‘Rain’ (verse 10 in section A mirrored by verse 34 in section A’), ‘Son’ (verse 13 in section B mirrored by verse 33 in section B’), ‘Patience’ (verse 17 in section C mirrored by verse 31 in section C’), ‘Do you not see that God has subjected things’ (verse 20 in section D mirrored by verse 29 in section D’), and ‘Creation’ (verse 25 in section E mirrored by verse 28 in section E’).

Chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Fāṭir*

The chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Fāṭir* can be presented as six themes: ‘Angels and animals’ (verse 1 in section A mirrored by verse 45 in section A’; the link between angels and animals is reinforced by Q. 16:49 and the similarity between Q. 35:1 and Q. 24:45), ‘Nobody can frustrate God’ (verse 2 in section B mirrored by verse 44 in section B’), ‘Evil schemes’ (verse 10 in section C mirrored by verse 43 in section C’), ‘Those you invoke besides God’ (verse 13 in section D mirrored by verse 40 in section D’), ‘Successors’ (verse 16 in section E mirrored by verse 39 in section E’; also see Q. 6:133, which is effectively a combination of sections E and E’), and ‘The Book’ (verse 25 in section F mirrored by verse 31 in section F’).

Chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Qāf*

The chiastic structure of *Sūrat al-Qāf* can be presented as five themes: ‘The Qur’an’ (verse 1 in section A mirrored by verse 45 in section A’), ‘Resurrection and returning to God’ (verse 3 in section B mirrored by verse 43 in section B’), ‘Creation of the skies and the earth’ (verses 6–7 in section C mirrored by verse 38 in section C’), ‘Reminders for a certain kind of people’ (verse 8 in section D mirrored by verse 37 in section D’), and ‘Prior generations of wrongdoers destroyed’ (verses 12–4 in section E mirrored by verse 36 in section E’).

Concluding remarks

The reuse of a conspicuous word or consonantal root often solidifies the links between mirrored sections of a chiastic structure,⁷ and such repetitions of consonantal roots or even entire phrases are present in most of the correspondences outlined in this study. Despite such evidence, the validity of these thematic links remains to be systematically investigated; the chiastic structures proposed here are tentative. Ultimately, identifying such chiastic structures may contribute to our understanding of suras as coherent units as opposed to ad hoc compilations of unrelated passages,⁸ and the structures can also serve as exegetical tools if the linked verses elaborate upon one another.

References

¹ Todd Lawson, 'Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text', *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137: 1 (2017), p. 215.

² Mehdi Azaiez, 'The Throne Verse ('āyat-l-kursī) in Light of Rhetorical Analysis', *International Qur'anic Studies Association*, 4 Mar. 2013, <https://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/2013/03/04/ttvir/>.

³ Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2014), p. 20; Nevin Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), p. 102.

⁴ Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, p. 43.

⁵ Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1996), pp. 141–2.

⁶ Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis*, trans. Jerry Ryan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 59-60.

⁷ Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, p. xvi.

⁸ Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, pp. xi-xvi.