

***The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes***, by Nevin Reda (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), xi + 250 pp., ISBN: 978-0-7735-4886-2, \$95.47 (hb)

Considering recent Western Qur'anic studies, there is no doubt that "coherence/unity studies" is one of the prominent research areas. In this context, especially after the 1980s, the chapters (*sūrahs*) of the Qur'ān have been analyzed on the basis of the hypothesis that they are literary unities. Among the studies that ignited this literature was the *Studien Zur Composition der Mekkanischen Suren* (1981) by Angelika Neuwirth. Since then, these studies have ranged from short Meccan *sūrahs* to the longest Medinan ones. When considering the general conception of the Qur'anic text from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Western literature, it would not be wrong to describe "coherence/unity studies" as a kind of "challenge" to previous studies describing the Qur'anic text as "unsystematic," "boring," or possessing a "lack of unity/coherence."

One of the recent studies on the structure of the Qur'anic text appeared in 2017 by Nevin Reda from the University of Toronto: *The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative, Structure, and Running Themes*, the revised version of her PhD dissertation submitted in 2010. This work is dedicated to the analysis of the text structure of the *sūrat al-Baqarah*, the longest chapter of the Qur'ān, from a "holistic" perspective. Reda's work is significant for two main reasons. The first is that the author's work is based on the hypothesis that the *sūrat al-Baqarah* is a holistic unit, not a compilation of several unconnected passages, as usually proposed by previous Western Qur'anic scholars. Moreover, the driving force of the scholar to exert such an effort is not a religious concern such as to show the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān. Rather, Reda analyzes the structure of the *sūrah* by way of contemporary literary theory, Biblical studies, and the notion of orality (p. 6). Drawing particular attention to the "orality" elements in establishing the unity of the *sūrat al-Baqarah*,

Reda suggests that oral literary elements of the text must be taken into account in unity studies (pp. 7, 26-28). She claims that it is appropriate to analyze the *sūrah* as a “literary genre” and to take a path that makes assumptions on this basis (p. 10).

In the first chapter of her work, “How to Read the Qurʾān Holistically,” Reda focuses on how the Qurʾān can be read as a whole structure. According to her, a kind of reading that concentrates on the whole of the *sūrah* rather than focusing on short passages is required. Short passages should be seen as “building blocks” that make up the whole *sūrah* rather than being read independently (p. 16). In this context, according to Reda, the term “holistic” goes beyond the studies of “coherence,” which proceeds as the successive linking of verses or verse passages and refers to reading the *sūrah* from a wider perspective (pp. 18-19). Referring to the classical and contemporary *tafsīr* literature in the context of the subject in this part of her work, Reda also compares the holistic approach she adopts with both the “atomistic” approach that focuses on the verse and verse passages and the contemporary approaches in which the *sūrahs* are read around certain main themes (pp. 20-23).

Reda analyzes the text structure of the *sūrat al-Baqarah* based on the combination of two types of reading. She describes the first of these as “divine self-revelatory reading,” which means that “the text describes the transcendental being from the perspective of the transcendent being.” In other words, this way of reading implies that God surrounds the text as a central protagonist (pp. 33-34). The other is defined as “pedagogical reading,” which considers the human-centered language of the Qurʾān. In sum, the scholar attempts to conduct a holistic reading from both a God and human-centered perspective (pp. 37-38). According to her, the dialogic relationship between these two reading styles contributes to the holistic reading of the *sūrah* (pp. 40-42).

The second chapter examines the relationship of the *sūrat al-Fātiḥah* with the *sūrat al-Baqarah* by referring to literary devices such as *iqtiṣāṣ*, *concatenation*, and *iltifāt* (pp. 50-61). According to Reda, considering that the Qurʾān has an oral character, it must make the addressees aware of the subject changes through some rhetorical elements. Therefore, instead of concentrating on the thematic changes in a *sūrah*, the main focus should be on the rhetoric. In this context, she applies “inclusion,” a well-known rhetorical element in

Biblical studies as well, to show the sub-chapters of the *sūrat* al-Baqarah.

Thus, in the third chapter, the *sūrab* is analyzed with reference to repeating elements of the *sūrabs* to identify seven inclusios within three main panels in the *sūrat* al-Baqarah (pp. 70-81). Reda argues that appealing to rhetorical elements in dividing the *sūrab* into sub-chapters instead of contending with thematic elements is a more essential and objective approach (p. 91). In addition to inclusios, the musical term “crescendo,” which means “a gradual increase in loudness,” is another main element in Reda’s analysis of the structure of the *sūrab*. Accordingly, any phrase in the *sūrab* repeats by expanding in its later parts (pp. 94-96). According to Reda, there is an increasing emphasis in both the inclusios and the thematic elements (p. 103).

In the fourth chapter of her work, “Thematic Affirmation,” Reda focuses on the chiasitic structure of the *sūrab* (p. 107). The fifth chapter, “God as Guide,” analyzes the divine self-revelatory reading of the *sūrab* with specific reference to the literary element “leitwort” (pp. 125-134). The next chapter, “Placing Humanity at the Focal Point,” forms the other wing of her reading: While God is at the center of her reading in the former chapter, man settles in the center here. Thus, we witness a reading consisting of the combination of “divine self-revelatory” reading and the “pedagogical” reading (pp. 140-155). In the last chapter of her work, “Windows into the Tradition,” Reda includes the analyses of Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā’ī (d. 885/1480) and Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1981) regarding the structure of al-Baqarah. According to Reda, both *mufasssirs* made important contributions to the field in approaching the *sūrab* as a unity (p. 158). In addition, she mentions scholars who are prominent in the context of *munāsabah* literature (pp. 158-184).

Reda mentions the historical process of the emergence of holistic approaches in Biblical texts in the “Appendix” to her work. In addition, the scholar, who also provides information about the terminology employed in the aforementioned approaches, addresses the common points of holistic approaches in Biblical and Qur’ānic studies (pp. 197-201).

The present book has acquired fame among the studies that can be called “unity/coherence studies” in recent Western Qur’ānic studies. Reda appeals to not only Biblical studies but also the

disciplines of music and literature in her analyses. The analysis is impressive at many points, but because it is ultimately a “reader-oriented” (p. 93) reading, it contains subjective arguments. For instance, it would not be difficult for a reader of the Qur’ān to see a kind of “divine self-revelatory” or “pedagogical” relation among the verses (*āyats*) of many *sūras*. In addition, although the application of a musical element like crescendo specific to the *sūrat* al-Baqarah seems impressive, it is necessary to investigate whether this element can be witnessed in the other long *sūras*. This work might encourage new initiatives in this regard. Another example of subjectivity is the chiasmic structure of *sūrat* al-Baqarah, which is given as ABC/B’C’A’/C’’B’’A’ (p. 107), and is different from the suggestions of other scholars, such as Mustansir Mir, Neal Robinson, Raymond Farrin, Michel Cuypers, Mathias Zahniser, and D. E. Smith, on the chiasmic structure of the same *sūrah*. In the last instance, Reda’s work is particularly indispensable for readers interested in the structure of the Qur’ānic text, as it opens interesting “windows” into the field.

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