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**A Comparative Study on the Holistic Approach to the Qur'ân**

*Kur'ân'a Bütüncül Yaklaşım Üzerine Mukayeseli Bir İnceleme*

**Ersin KABAKCI**

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Hitit Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi

Temel İslam Bilimleri, Tefsir Anabilim Dalı

Assistant Professor, Hitit University, Faculty of Theology

Basic Islamic Sciences, Department of Tafsir

Türkiye

[ersinkabakci@hitit.edu.tr](mailto:ersinkabakci@hitit.edu.tr)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0913-8087>

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**Abstract**

The holistic approach to the Qur'ān is a phrase used under different headings in the field of tafsīr. The article assumes that a comparative analysis of the usage areas will provide more clear and understandable data on the scope of this phrase. The aim of the article is to bring out the scope of the expressions such as the holistic approach to the Qur'ān and the unity of the Qur'ānic text, thus to reveal the difference among these uses. Based on this background, the article presents and analyzes five different topics in which the aforementioned phrases are used in the field of tafsīr. These are the interpretation of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān (tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān), the relationship between verses and sūras (munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar), thematic tafsīr (al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī), sūrah-based tafsīr, and structural studies based on Semitic rhetoric. Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān means the explanation of a verse with other verses of the Qur'ān, thus referring to the understanding of the text in its inner unity. Munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar contains the thesis that the verse and sūra units should have a successive relationship, so it has the concept of unity that is expected to emerge from this relationship. Thematic tafsīr proposes to consider the verses related to a particular subject of the Qur'ān as a whole. Sūra-based tafsīr claims that the Qur'ānic sūras are whole units with certain main themes. As for the structural studies based on Semitic rhetoric defended by some scholars in recent Western studies, the Qur'ān is a text that has some symmetrical structures and therefore has structural unity. In each of these headings, we come across holistic approaches that differ from each other at certain points.

**Keywords:** Tafsīr, Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān, Tanāsüb al-Qur'ān, Thematic Tafsīr, Sūra-based tafsīr, Symmetry.

**Öz**

Kur'an'a bütüncül yaklaşım, tefsir ilminde farklı başlıklar altında kullanılan bir tabirdir. Makalenin var-sayımı, kullanım alanlarına dair yapılacak mukayeseli bir incelemenin bu tabirin kapsamına ilişkin daha açık ve anlaşılır veriler sunacağı şeklindedir. Makalenin amacı, Kur'an'a bütüncül yaklaşım, Kur'an metninin bütünlüğü gibi ifadelerin tefsir ilminde hangi kapsamlarda kullanıldığını tespit ederek bunlar arasındaki farklılığı ortaya koymaktır. Bu arka plandan hareketle makale, adı geçen tabirlerin tefsir ilminde kullanıldığı beş farklı başlığı ortaya koymakta ve incelemektedir. Bunlar; Kur'an'ın Kur'an'la tefsiri, ayetler ve sureler arası münasebet, konulu tefsir, sure-merkezli tefsir ve Sami retoriğini esas alan yapısal incelemelerdir. Kur'an'ın Kur'an'la tefsiri, bir ayetin Kur'an'ın diğer ayetleri ile izahını ifade etmekte, böylece metnin kendi iç bütünlüğünde anlaşılmasına gönderme yapmaktadır. Ayetler ve sureler arası münasebet, ayet ve sure birimlerinin ardışık anlam ilişkisine sahip olması gerektiği tezini barındırması itibarıyla son tahlilde bu ilişkiden sadır olması beklenen bir bütünlük telakkisine sahiptir. Konulu tefsir, Kur'an'ın belirli bir konusuna ilişkin ayetleri bir bütün olarak ele almayı önermektedir. Suretemelli tefsir, Kur'an surelerinin belirli ana temalara sahip bütün birimler olduğu iddiasını taşımaktadır. Son dönem Batılı çalışmalarda bazı araştırmacıların savunduğu Sami retoriğini esas alan yapısal incelemelerde ise Kur'an, bazı simetrik metin yapılarına sahip olan, dolayısıyla yapısal bütünlüğü haiz bir metin olarak takdim edilmektedir. Bu başlıkların her birinde karşımıza birbirinden belirli noktalarda ayrılan farklı bütüncül yaklaşımlar çıkmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tefsir, Kur'an'ın Kur'an'la Tefsiri, Tenāsübü'l-Kur'ān, Konulu Tefsir, Sure-merkezli Tefsir, Simetri.

**Introduction**

It is possible to define “holistic approach” as a term that expresses the necessity of evaluating an event, a situation or a text in its wholeness in order to be understood correctly. In this approach, it is aimed to make a more comprehensive evaluation by taking a wide-angle photograph of the subject of study and to prevent possible misunderstandings. On the other hand, focusing only on the point of discussion in order to understand an issue is defined as “atomistic approach”. This second approach is criticized on the grounds that “the connection of the part with the whole is ignored”. Because, according to the holistic approach, it is not possible to

reveal a comprehensive interpretation process by focusing only on the particular event or phenomenon itself. For example, the correct evaluation of the success or failure of an institution depends on the analysis of all units as a whole and on the basis of their interrelationships. For this reason, the evaluation of success or failure arising from a single unit in the institution or even a single person in the unit only based on that unit or person expresses a wrong point of view according to the holistic approach. Therefore, the holistic approach necessitates an examination that takes into account the stakeholders that are likely to have an impact on the unit or person that is the subject of the research, such as intra-unit and inter-unit relations, institutional structure and administrative structure.<sup>1</sup>

It seems possible that the “atomistic” approach,<sup>2</sup> which is positioned at the opposite pole, may also criticize the holistic approach. For example, the claim that an event, situation or a text passage should be interpreted as a whole, instead of being handled and analyzed on its own, can sometimes lead to “forced” connections, which can turn into an obstacle rather than contributing to the revealing of the correct meaning. As a matter of fact, the claim that a part must always be made sense of within the whole seems, at least at first glance, to express an over-generalizing perspective, as it presupposes an organic structure that is related to all its parts.

The aforementioned subject expresses a brief reference to the theoretical ground of the discussions in the context of the “atomistic” or “holistic” approach to the correct understanding of the Qur'ānic text. In this study, we do not aim to make a detailed analysis of the types of approaches mentioned, but to make a brief and comparative analysis of the discussion areas in which the issues of “holistic approach to the Qur'ān” and “the unity of the text of the Qur'ān” are positioned, which are expressed in different contexts within the field of tafsīr. The research assumes that the comparative analysis of the aforementioned subjects will contribute to obtaining more comprehensive results on the subject. In this context, the article aims to create a panoramic picture for the reader about the content, scope and limitations of the terms such as “the unity of the text of the Qur'ān” and “holistic approaches to the Qur'ān” in the field of tafsīr.

It should be underlined that concepts such as “holistic”, “unity”, “textual unity”, “disconnectedness of the text”, “context problem” are mainly included in the terminology of the field of literature. Despite this, it is observed that the above-mentioned concepts are frequently used in both Biblical and Qur'ānic studies. It seems that the most important reason for this is that the literary structures of the sacred texts - considering the formation processes - are quite far from the appearance of a work written by a single author around a certain theme -at least at first glance. For this reason, it is seen that the text structure of the Qur'ān has turned into an important field of study in the field of tafsīr. In addition, for the last half-century, a body of

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<sup>1</sup> Nevin Reda, “Holistic Approaches to the Qur'ān: A Historical Background”, *Religion Compass* 4/8 (2010), 495.

<sup>2</sup> For the use of the term “atomistic” in this context, see Reda, “Holistic Approaches to the Qur'ān: A Historical Background”, 496, 500; Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān: A Study of Islāhī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986), 1.

literature has emerged regarding the textual structures of both the Bible and the Qur'ān in Western academia related to the aforementioned key concepts.<sup>3</sup>

It is known that a significant literature has emerged in the field of tafsīr since the early period, especially within the scope of munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar, to find the inner coherence of the text of the Qur'ān. In this context, the consensus on the divine basis of the arrangement of the verses seems to have encouraged studies to determine the relationship between the verses. The scholars, who believe that the arrangement of the sūrahs is also divinely-based, tried to reveal the successive relationship between the sūras. However, it should be noted that the search for textual coherence is not limited to the 'ilm al-munāsabāt. For example, tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān, the first examples of which were given by the Prophet, is important in terms of the context based on the “internal unity” of the address (khitāb), which has taken its place among the forms of tafsīr since early times. When we look at the *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* by Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150), the author of the earliest complete tafsīr that reached us, it is remarkable that “tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān” is witnessed in the interpretation of many verses. In addition, the presence of readings taking into account the relationship between the verses in the work is important in that it shows the understanding that the Qur'ān has an inner coherence and context in terms of its current arrangement extends to the earliest tafsīrs.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in the modern period, we come across approaches related to a holistic approach to the Qur'ān and the aim of finding the unity of the Qur'ānic text. Among these, “thematic tafsīr”, “sūrah-based tafsīr” and “structural studies based on Semitic rhetoric” can be addressed.

### 1. The Relationship between Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān and the Holistic Approach

Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān (تفسير القرآن بالقرآن) refers to the efforts to explain a verse or a group of verses with the other verses of the Qur'ān. Undoubtedly, behind the suggestions of “understanding a text based on itself” lies the notion that that text has internal unity. It is predictable that such a reading suggestion, which seems reasonable for texts written by an author with a certain theme, expresses a difficult approach to applicability for scriptures that were revealed over long periods of time, composed of verses with different content and contexts, containing a lot of pronouns and historical references.

It is known that the method of tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān was presented by Ibn Taymiyya as the “best of the ways of tafsīr” (أحسن طرق التفسير) in the later period. For example, the Prophet explained the word “oppression” (ظلم) in al-An'ām 6/82 with the word “polytheism” (الشرك) in Luqmān 31/13. Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān is applied under various titles such as the restriction of the absolute (al-muṭlaq/al-muqayyad), the allocation of a general word ('āmm/khāṣṣ), the explanation of the strange words (gharīb), the explanation of obscure matters

<sup>3</sup> Ersin Kabakçı, *Çağdaş Batı Literatüründe Kur'ân Metnine Yaklaşımlar: Metin Bütünlüğü Arayışları* (Ankara: Fecr Yayınları, 2020), 130-134.

<sup>4</sup> For more detail, see Ersin Kabakçı, “Ayetler Arası Münasebet Meselesinin Tefsirlere Yansımalarının Tarihi Kökenine Yönelik Bir Sorgulama: Tefsîru Mukâtil Örneği”, *Tefsîr Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4/2 (30 Ekim 2020), 420-442.

(mubham), and the making the ambiguous words clear (mujmal/mubayyan).<sup>5</sup> When such titles are considered on a text-centered basis, it is clear that the Qur'ān is assumed to have a holistic structure, therefore it refers to the necessity of performing a reading that takes into account the unity of the text. On the other hand, since there was no concept of a completed book during the nuzūl period, it should be emphasized that the examples at that time related to tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān do not reflect a systematic holistic approach. However, it can be said that these examples have a nature that pave the way for the aforementioned type of readings with the transformation of the Qur'ān into the Muṣḥaf in the following period. Because, if some of the verses are interpreted with others even in a period when the Muṣḥaf is not completed, it should not be strange to come across more reading examples in the same frame when the book is completed.

Here we need to underline an important point. In the early period, tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān was not seen as an adequate tafsīr method alone, so the riwāyas and the means of ra'y accompanied it. In fact, it should be noted that the method of tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān in the following periods was not in the form of a purely text-centered approach, as in some approaches witnessed in the contemporary period, and it was not reflected in the tafsīr works in this way. For example, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, one of the early mufasssirs, whose tafsīr work has many examples of tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān, also included riwāyas. Likewise, Ibn Taymiyya, who placed this method in the first place while mentioning the best ways of tafsīr, did not present it as a sufficient method on its own. He states that since tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān may not be sufficient to understand all the verses correctly, it is necessary to refer to the Sunnah of the Prophet, the words of the saḥāba and then the ṭābi'ūn, and after all these, the means of ra'y.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to the contemporary period, approaches that break the aforementioned hierarchical structure and are based only on the text of the Qur'ān appear. This is important as it refers to the understanding that a text-centered reading will be sufficient. Because in such an approach, for the reader who is alone with the text, perhaps the “unity” of the text appears as the only controlling factor of the correct meaning. Namely, in such a Qur'ān-centered perspective, the text should present a structure with internal consistency and unity so that contradictory or incomplete meanings do not emerge from it. Therefore, it can be stated that the concept of unity in the interpretation of the Qur'ān with the Qur'ān in the early and classical period was not based only on a Qur'ān-centered (text-centered) reading, rather it was presented as one of the other elements of tafsīr. In the contemporary period, it is seen that the integrity of the text naturally comes to the fore in approaches that largely ignore the other elements of tafsīr by placing the Qur'ān in the center.

<sup>5</sup> For the examples of tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān see Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Zahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssirin* (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 2000), 1/31-36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fi usūl al-tafsīr*, critical ed. 'Adnān Zarzūr, n.d., 93-114. For some significant remarks on the reflections of Ibn Taymiyya's approach to the classical and modern tafsīrs see also Sevim Gelgeç, “İbn Teymiyye Ekseninde Kur'ân'ın Kur'ân'la Tefsiri Meselesine Dair Bazı Mülahazalar”, *Darulfunun İlahiyat* 32/2 (2021), 14-29.

## 2. The Relationship between Munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar and Holistic Approach

Munāsabāt-based readings, which are generally initiated with the tafsīrs of Zamakhsharī and Rāzī, consider the successive meaning relationship between the verses and sūras of the Qur'ān as an important element in tafsīr. In fact, this approach, traces of which can be found in much earlier periods, has a unique view of unity in that it focuses on the relationship between sūras and consecutive verses within a sūra. It should be noted that the consensus that the order of the verses is tawqīfī (divinely-based) has a significant role in the thought that there are successive relations between the verses in terms of the arrangement of the Muṣḥaf.

Some scholars, such as Suyūfī, who believed that the order of the sūrahs is also tawqīfī, carried the issue of the relationship between the verses to the “inter-sūrah” dimension and conducted studies aiming to reveal the thematic connection between successive sūras. These studies both focus on the successive connection between the sūras and try to determine the relationship between the last verses of a sūra and the first verses of the following one, based on the same concern. Therefore, in such an approach, the Qur'ān is read on the basis of the belief that it is a “holistic” text with successive relationships between verses and sūras from beginning to end. In the readings based on the relationship between the verses, statements such as “X is mentioned in this verse since Y was mentioned in the previous one” are frequently encountered. In this context, it is seen that various rhetoric terms such as tanzīr, teḥalluṣ, iltifāt, and taḍādd are referred to in order to express the type of relationship between the verses. As for the relationship between the sūras, expressions such as “As the subject of X is mentioned in sūra al-Fātiḥa, issues such as Y are included in sūra al-Baqara as well.” and “Sūra Āl 'Imrān has a content that completes the Z purpose of sūra al-Baqara.” are frequently encountered since the issue of “relationship between successive sūras” is focused in such works.<sup>7</sup>

Readings based on munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar, when viewed from “holistic approach”, differ from tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān. At first glance, there does not seem to be a direct conception of a “holistic” view here. However, it can be noticed that the idea that the verses in a sūra have successive relations includes the thesis that the verses form a whole in total. In fact, it is clear that both the search for a relationship between the sūrahs and the efforts to find the relationship between the last verses of a sūrah and the first verses of the next one include the claim that the Qur'ān has a “holistic” structure. The difference of the emphasis on “unity” here from the first title (tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān) is that the establishment of unity depends on the successive relationship between verses and sūras. Therefore, it can be stated that the concept of unity in this context has a scope that requires the text to be read more closely and “linear” follow-up due to the importance of successiveness. However, for the approach that takes into account the successive relationship between the verses and the sūras to gain the “holistic” characterization, it should be stated that there must be a successive connectedness that includes the “whole text”. For example, a successive relationship can be established between the first 10 verses of a sūra. Later, another successive relationship can be made between the next 15 verses. However, if a relationship cannot be established between these two text units,

<sup>7</sup> See Jalāluddīn Suyūfī, *Tanāsūq al-durar fī tanāsūb al-suwar*, critical ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad 'Aṭā (Beirūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya), 1986, 63 etc.

it is of course possible to talk about an atomistic reading rather than a holistic one. Therefore, in order for the approach based on the relationship between successive verses and sūras to gain a “holistic” feature, it is necessary to establish a continuous relationship that covers the entire text by extending a whole sūra or even between the sūras. This stands out as the most important point that makes it difficult, at least in practice, to include munāsabāt-based readings within the holistic approach.

Another issue in the context of the subject is that the only factor that encourages the literature on munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar is not the divinely-based order of the verses. For example, in the sūrah-based works that we will discuss later, the successive relationship between the verses is considered important, although it is not an obligation for all verses. As a matter of fact, in such an approach that considers the sūrah as a literary whole, it is understandable to expect this unity to be established by the strong connection between the verses. Likewise, since the Qur'ān has been analyzed as a “literary text”, especially in recent Western studies, it should be stated that an analysis based on “literary” concerns is dominant in the studies included in this scope.

Before moving on to “thematic tafsīr”, it would be useful to emphasize one more point regarding the evaluations we made in the context of both tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān and munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar. Considering the historical process of both subjects going back to the earliest periods, we should state that we are aware that the literature in question was encouraged by “theological” rather than “literary” concerns. In this context, it can be thought that reading these two issues through the concepts of unity in the modern period contains a kind of anachronism and therefore deserves criticism. However, these lines aim to draw attention to the fact that there is a perception of “unity” in the last analysis, although it is based on theological concerns rather than a “literary” one. In other words, although the relevant literature did not set a goal of revealing that the Qur'ān is a holistic text, literature that can be included in the holistic approach emerged arising from the belief that the Qur'ān has a self-interpreting feature and that there is a successive relationship between its verses and the sūras.

### 3. The Relationship between Thematic Tafsīr and Holistic Approach

Thematic tafsīr (التفسير الموضوعي) refers to the tafsīr activity by focusing on one of the subjects of the Qur'ān and taking into account all the verses on the relevant subject.<sup>8</sup> In some definitions, it is seen that the order of revelation among the verses containing the same subject is expected to be taken into account in such works.<sup>9</sup> As a result, it is possible to place the tafsīr activities carried out by collecting the verses on a subject and paying regard to the time of their revelation under the thematic tafsīr. Although it is presented as a contemporary tafsīr method, some studies draw attention to its similarity with the literature of Qur'ānic sciences such as al-nāsikh wa'l-mansūkh, majāz al-Qur'ān, mutashābih al-Qur'ān.<sup>10</sup> It is observed that

<sup>8</sup> For different definitions of thematic tafsīr see Şahin Güven, *Konulu Tefsir Metodu* (İstanbul: Düşün Yayıncılık, 2014), 63-69.

<sup>9</sup> Mevlüt Güngör, “Tefsirde Konulu Tefsir Metodu”, *İslami Araştırmalar* 2/7 (1988), 50; Güven, *Konulu Tefsir Metodu*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Şahin Güven, “Günümüz Tefsir Çalışmalarında Yeni Bir Yöntem: Konulu Tefsir Metodu”, *Taribten Günümüze Kur'ân'a Yaklaşımlar*, eds. Bilal Gökkır et al. (İstanbul: Özkan Matbaacılık, 2010), 444-446.

Muhammad Husayn al-Zahabī (d. 1915) opened a title as “Thematic Tafsīr” in his work called *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn* and included works such as the aforementioned ones above under this title. *Al-tibyān fī aqsām al-Qur'ān* by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1370), *Kitāb al-Nāsikh wa'l-mansūkh fī'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Abū Ja'far al-Nahhās (d. 338/950), *Asbāb al-nuzūl* by Wāhidī (d. 468/1076) and *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* by Jassās (d. 370/981) are presented as examples of the “thematic tafsīrs” of the previous period by Zahabī.<sup>11</sup> However, it can be stated that the literature in question does not have a scope that can be described as “thematic tafsīr” on the grounds that it is works that compile riwāyas or historical information on the subject rather than presenting an independent tafsīr method.<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, although Zahabī includes such works from the classical period at the beginning of the relevant title, it is seen that he does not continue the subject on the same ground in the lines that follow, and he moves away from it.<sup>13</sup>

What makes the thematic tafsīr important for this study is the emphasis on “unity”, which is also reflected in its definition. It is noteworthy that the evaluations that this method “give a holistic and comprehensive perspective to the mufasssīr” are mentioned in the studies on the thematic tafsīr. However, it should be emphasized that the holistic view here does not cover the whole of the Qur'ān, but “the whole of the verses related to the subject that is intended to be interpreted”. In this respect, a study to be conducted on subjects such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage takes place in the form of the scholar collecting only the verses that can be directly or perhaps indirectly related to those subjects, and approaching it within this “unity”. Therefore, while this approach expresses a “holistic” perspective in terms of referring to “the unity of the subject”, it also refers to an “atomistic” feature in terms of centering just a certain part of the verses of the Qur'ān in the final analysis. In addition, some scholars criticize this method because while the verses with the same subject are evaluated together the place of these verses in the order of the Muṣḥaf is put on the back burner.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. The Relationship between Sūra-based Tafsīr and Holistic Approach

The tendency to read each sūrah in the Qur'ān “in its own unity” and as “whole units” has come to the fore especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's tafsīr literature. Behind this, there is a reaction to the orientalist literature, in which the Qur'ānic sūras are presented as dispersed, unsystematic and disorganized literary units.

In this context, the leading mufasssīrs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), Mawdūdī (d. 1979), Sayyid Muhammad Ṭabāṭabā'ī, (d. 1981), Izzad Darwaza (d. 1984), Ḥamīduddīn Farāhī (d. 1930) and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (d. 1997) made tafsīr works that attach special importance to the “sūrah unity”.<sup>15</sup> In the tafsīr introductions of the aforementioned mufasssīrs, it is seen that the claims about the sūras' being “far from unity, unsystematic” in the

<sup>11</sup> Zahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn*, 1/110.

<sup>12</sup> Güngör, “Tefsirde Konulu Tefsir Metodu”, 50-51.

<sup>13</sup> Zahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn*, 1/110-111.

<sup>14</sup> Abdülhamit Birişik, “Tefsir”, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Accessed 15 Haziran 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Mustansir Mir, “The Sūra as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in the Qur'ān Exegesis”, *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G.R. Hawting - Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (New York: Routledge, 2013), 211-215.



Western literature are referred to directly or indirectly.<sup>16</sup> This confirms the thesis that such claims are an important factor in the emergence of the aforementioned literature.

It should be said that the idea that the sūrahs present a holistic structure and that readings should be done to find this unity expresses a narrower approach than tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān and thematic tafsīr. Because here, the focus is not on the whole of the Qur'an, but only on a unit of sūra. In addition, in the sūrah-based approach, it is tried to find the main theme of the analyzed sūra rather than the verses related to a specific subject as in thematic tafsīr. On the other hand, it should be stated that the sūrah-based readings differ from the munāsabāt-based tafsīr in another aspect. That is, while a “successive relationship” is necessary for readings based on munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suar, this successiveness is not a necessity in studies that tend to read each sūra as a whole unit. In this context, the main theme of the sūrah is described with names such as “miḥwar”, “gharaḍ”, “amūd” and the verses in the sūrah are analyzed within the framework of serving the main theme “without the necessity of successive relationship”.<sup>17</sup> For example, Işlāḥī identified the ‘amūd of the sūra al-Nisā’ as the “foundations of Muslim social solidarity”.<sup>18</sup> Quṭb, on the other hand, draws so much attention to the issue of the unity of the sūras that even the fact that a sūra consists of verses revealed in different time periods does not harm the “unity” of this sūra.<sup>19</sup> According to Quṭb, every sūra has an “axis” (miḥwar) and all verses serve the axis (central theme) of the sūra.<sup>20</sup> According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, every sūra has a “gharaḍ” (aim) and the verses of the sūra form a unity by serving this goal. For example, sūra al-An'ām aims to convey the oneness of Allāh to humanity.<sup>21</sup> In sum, in this approach, the unity of the sūras is tried to be found through its central theme. In the studies carried out for this purpose, although no obligatory succession is observed, attention is paid to the relationship between the verses of the sūra. At the same time, the references to other sūras show that tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān is also used. This is important in that it shows that a method the purpose of which is to find the unity of the sūras sometimes gets help from the whole of the Qur'ān.

## 5. The Relationship between Structural Studies Based on Semitic Rhetoric and Holistic Approach

According to a claim brought to the agenda by some Western Qur'ānic scholars, since the Qur'ān is a Semitic text, it should be analyzed within the rules of rhetoric belonging to this culture. The way to reveal the holistic structure of the Qur'ān is to analyze the text structures of the culture in which it was born. Accordingly, in Semitic rhetoric, texts do not follow a linear progression in the form of introduction-development-result as in Greek rhetoric, but are shaped around certain circular literary structures. Parallel symmetry (ABC/ABC), mirror symmetry

<sup>16</sup> For instance, see Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1906), 63; Gustav Weil, “An Introduction to the Qur'ān III”, *The Biblical World* 5/5 (1895), 348-349.

<sup>17</sup> Mīr, “The Sūra as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in the Qur'ān Exegesis”, 213-215.

<sup>18</sup> Mīr, *Coherence in the Qur'ān: A Study of Islāhī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qur'an*, 48-50.

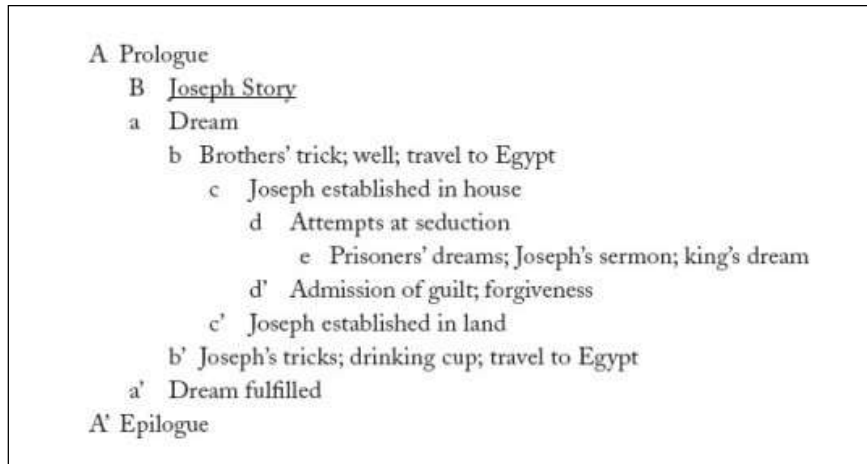
<sup>19</sup> For Quṭb's literary approach to some early sūras see Ersin Kabakçı, “Sayyid Quṭb's Literary Approach to Some Early Meccan Sūrahs: A Comparative Analysis with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Readings”, *Dergiyant* 7/13 (2019), 242-257.

<sup>20</sup> See Sayyid Quṭb, *fi Zilāl al-Qur'an* (Beirūt: Dār al-shurūq, 1972), 1/555.

<sup>21</sup> Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Miẓān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, (Beirūt: Muassasa al-A'lemī li'l-maṭbū'a), 1997, 7/5.

(ABC-C'B'A') and concentric symmetry (ABC-X-C'B'A') are the most prominent of such structures.<sup>22</sup> Apart from the aforementioned symmetrical text structures, there are also texts with structures that are described as “partially-symmetrical”.

In the context of the subject, each of the letters mentioned above refers to a certain theme or structure. Thus, it is stated that there is a thematic or structural relationship between A and A', B and B' or C and C', each of which symbolizes text units in various quantities. The X unit in the middle of the text in the concentric composition symbolizes the central theme around which the entire text revolves.<sup>23</sup> In order to clarify the subject, we think it would be useful to share the concentric structure revealed by Raymond Farrin in Sūra Yūsuf here:



The Structure of Sūra Yūsuf by Farrin

As is seen, it is claimed that Sūra Yūsuf, which consists of 111 verses, has a symmetrical structure based on themes symbolized by letters. For example, while the theme of “dream” is mentioned in verses 4-7, a', which includes verses 99-101, refers to “the fulfillment of the dream”. It is seen that the scholar makes similar thematic connections in other parts of the sūra. As for X, as stated before, it constitutes the central theme of the sūra according to him.<sup>24</sup>

It is noteworthy that this approach is quite different from the first four. Because here, the reader approaches any verse of the Qur'ān, a group of verses or the sūras on the basis of the above-mentioned literary structures. For example, in tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān, there is no obligation to take into account the textual structures, as is here. On the other hand, this approach focuses primarily on certain “structures” assumed to exist in the text, not any “theme” as in thematic tafsīr. It is clear that there is a connection between concentric symmetry and sūra-based tafsīr in the context of the “central theme”. However, in concentric symmetry, the central theme has to be in the center of the text, and the other text units must both have symmetry among themselves and serve the central theme in the center of the text. However, there are no

<sup>22</sup> For the samples of symmetrical text structures see Kabakçı, *Çağdaş Batı Literatüründe Kur'an Metnine Yaklaşımlar: Metin Bütünlüğü Arayışları*, 250-264.

<sup>23</sup> About two prominent scholars in this context and their related works see Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland-Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2014); Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text*, 43.

such structural requirements in sūra-based tafsīr. In addition, while the text unit focused on in the sūra-based approach is the sūra, the text unit here can be composed of a single verse, or it can have a scope that includes the entire Qur'ān. Finally, the expected unity in concentric symmetry is based on the “cyclical” relationship rather than the “linear” one that we underline in the munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar.

### Conclusion

Phrases such as “the unity of the text of the Qur'ān”, “the holistic approach to the Qur'ān” and “the reading of the Qur'ān in its own unity” are used in various contexts in the field of tafsīr. The way in which the Prophet and his companions interpreted the Qur'ān, the first examples of which were given during the revelation period, was undoubtedly taken into consideration in the following period. As a matter of fact, the first examples of tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān are seen during the revelation period and extend to the present day. However, apart from the limited tafsīr material available after the death of the Prophet and the first generation, Muslims' interaction with the Muṣḥaf directly caused different forms of tafsīr to emerge. For example, the belief that the arrangement of the Muṣḥaf is divinely-based encouraged readings based on the munāsabāt al-Qur'ān. On the other hand, in the contemporary period, new suggestions have emerged in the context of new searches on alternative tafsīr methods and thematic tafsīr has taken its place among them. In addition, the relationship between verses and sūras has become an important research area in Western literature, where the Qur'ān has been studied as a “literary text”, especially for the last half-century. Again, a reaction to the Western claims that the sūras are scattered and unsystematic literary structures has brought sūra-based readings to the fore in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century tafsīr works. Finally, the reading styles, which we mentioned under the title of “Structural Studies Based on Semitic Rhetoric”, have taken their place among the important research areas in Western Qur'ānic studies in recent years and seem to have brought an unusual method of searching for text unity to the literature.

It should be stated that there are commonalities in the context of a holistic approach among the subjects included in the five sub-headings. However, in this study, we tried to reveal which framework the holistic approach expresses in each title and the points where it differs from the others. According to this,

- In the tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān, “the whole of the verses of the Qur'ān” is taken into account in the explanation of a verse or a group of verses,
- In readings based on the munāsabāt al-āyāt wa'l-suwar, “the whole of successive relations between verses and sūras” is tried to be revealed,
- In “thematic tafsīr”, “the whole of the verses on the same subject” is taken into account,
- In sūra-based tafsīr, a sūra is analyzed as a holistic unit with a certain central theme and its verses serve this theme,
- In structural studies based on Semitic rhetoric, it has been observed that there is a notion of “unity consisting of certain symmetrical structures in text units” in different quantities from a verse to the whole text.

In sum, this article tried to find out what kind of unity conceptions exist in the five approaches we have discussed and at what points they differ. Although it is possible that the

aforementioned classifications may contain some deficiencies, this study, which perhaps represents a first initiative to deal with the issue with a “holistic” as well as a comparative perspective, will contribute to the discussions on the holistic approach to the Qur’ān. In this context, subjecting each approach to wider comparative analyzes with concrete examples will lead to more significant findings.

**Ethical Statement / Etik Beyan /**

Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur / It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited (Ersin KABAĞCI).

**Author(s) / Yazar(lar)**

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