



Are Some Qur'anic Verses More Virtuous Than Others? Reconciling Diverse Scholarly Views

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Introduction

Several prophetic reports underscore the special merit and reward associated with reciting, memorizing, or comprehending specific Qur’anic verses or chapters, suggesting a conceptual hierarchy of superiority within the Qur’an. Widely acknowledged among Muslims, certain verses hold particular significance, such as the opening chapter (*Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*), the verse of the Throne (*al-Kursī*), or the first ten verses of the chapter of the Cave (*Sūrat al-Kahf*). The Qur’an itself suggests varying levels of revelation, not only asserting its superiority over previous scriptures but also acknowledging the potential replacement of one verse with a better one. Indeed, an entire genre of scholarship was dedicated to compiling the reported virtues of the Qur’an as a whole, as well as specific chapters and verses.

As early Muslim scholars grappled with the conceptual understanding of God’s transcendent attributes, particularly the attribute of speech (*kalām*) in this context, a pressing question emerged: If the Qur’an is considered God’s speech, how can one part of God’s speech be better or preferred to another part? The response to this inquiry was far from unified. The contentious debates surrounding God’s attributes, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) describes, turned the issue into “a significant matter, resulting in widespread division among people.”¹

Discussions relevant to this matter began to emerge as early as the 2nd/8th century, particularly in the theological treatise attributed to Imam Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), *al-Fiqh al-akbar*. Subsequent scholars, including prominent scholarly figures like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn Taymiyya, extensively explored the issue. As a result, the subject evolved into an independent topic within the literature of Qur’anic Sciences (*‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*), as demonstrated by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) devoting a chapter in *al-Itqān* to “The Best of the Qur’an and its Distinct Parts” (*afḍal al-Qur’ān wa fādilih*). Furthermore, certain scholars dedicated entire books to this topic, among them Abū ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Darrāj (d. 693/1294) in a work that is no longer extant.² Ibn Taymiyya also addressed this subject in a fatwa,

¹ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, eds. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Qāsim and Muḥammad Qāsim, 37 vols. (Medina: Muḥamma‘ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā‘at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 2004), 17:10.

² Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, 17:73.

examining the meaning of the hadith describing *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (The Sincerity) as equivalent to one third of the Qur'an. His discussion was independently published in a book titled *Jawāb ahl al- 'ilm wa al-īmān*.³

Muslim scholars hold one of two main viewpoints regarding the uniformity of merit within the Qur'an. One group asserts that the Qur'an, as the embodiment of God's transcendent speech, possesses uniform merit throughout its text. The other group argues that certain parts of the Qur'an are more meritorious than others. This paper succinctly presents these perspectives and examines the evidence each side offers. It argues that the debate largely hinges on semantics, with each group of scholars emphasizing their distinct angle, while potentially overlooking the considerations of the opposing viewpoint.

The objective of this article is to establish a theological framework for understanding the concept of superiority (*tafḍīl*) of certain parts of the Qur'an. This brief article serves as an introduction to a series that will explore the detailed virtues of specific Qur'anic chapters and verses as reported in the corpus of Prophetic traditions.

The first opinion: All parts of the Qur'an are equally meritorious

No segment of the Qur'an is deemed superior to another. Despite being regarded as the minority opinion, this viewpoint is explicitly endorsed by or attributed to several eminent scholars, including Imam Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936), Abū Ḥātim ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965), Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386/996), Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qābisī (d. 403/1013), and Makkī ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Qaysī (d. 437/1045).⁴ Al-Darrāj asserts an established consensus among Sunni scholars that any textual references to the merits of specific parts of the Qur'an do

³ The full title of the work is *Jawāb ahl al- 'ilm wal-īmān bi-taḥqīq mā akhbar bih rasūl al-Raḥmān min anna qul huwa Allah aḥad ta 'dil thuluth al-Qur 'an* [The Response of the People of Knowledge and Faith in Verifying What the Messenger of the Merciful Reported: That 'Say: He is Allah, the One' is Equivalent to One-Third of the Qur'an]

⁴ Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Khalaf ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Yāsir ibn Ibrāhīm, 11 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, n.d.), 10:252; Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Farah al-Qurṭubī, *al-Tidhkār fī aḥḍal al-adhkār*, ed. Bashīr 'Uyūn, 3rd ed. (Damascus: Maktabat Dār al-Bayān, 1987), 45.

not imply inherent superiority.⁵ This holds true when pertaining to Allah's transcendent uncreated attribute of speech rather than our human experience of the Qur'anic text. Notably, not all of these authorities have left explicit statements on the issue that are extant in literature, and some of the reported views lack clarity or detail. The following provides a concise examination of select reports and statements.

Yahyā ibn Yahyā (d. 234/848) asserts, "Preferring some parts of the Qur'an over others is incorrect. This is why Mālik disapproved of the repetition or emphasis of one *sūrah* over others [in prayer]."⁶ In this context, we observe a practical application of the debate, emphasizing that a merit-based selective approach should not dictate the choice of verses during prayer.⁷ While explicit statements from Mālik on the issue are limited, his understanding of the abrogation verse appears to align with Yahyā's assertion. The abrogation verse serves as the linchpin in this debate, upheld by the majority opinion to imply varying degrees of excellence: "We do not abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten except that We bring forth one better than it or similar to it."⁸ However, Mālik interpreted the term "better" not as denoting excellence but rather held that it signifies a verse (or a ruling) replacing an abrogated one.⁹

In his seminal exegetical commentary (*tafsīr*), al-Ṭabarī delves deeper into the Qur'an's description of certain verses as better than others in the abrogation verse. He interpreted the intended meaning as 'We do not abrogate the ruling of a verse...' Consequently, the outcome of abrogation is that it "brings a ruling that is better for you than the ruling of the abrogated verse, whether in the immediate term due to its easiness on you, or in the Hereafter due to the greatness of its reward for enduring its burden."¹⁰ He further emphasizes, "It is not permissible for anything in the Qur'an to be better than something else because it is all the speech of Allah."¹¹

⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, 17:73.

⁶ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Tidhkār*, 45.

⁷ It is worth noting, however, that the Mālikī school does recognize the preference of reading specific parts of the Qur'an that the Prophet recommended for certain prayers.

⁸ Qur'an 2:106.

⁹ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Tidhkār*, 45.

¹⁰ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āyī al-Qur'an*, ed. 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī, 1st ed., 25 vols. (Cairo: Hajar, 2001), 2:401.

¹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 403; see also al-Ḥusayn ibn Mas'ūd al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, ed. Muḥammad al-Nimr et al., 8 vols. (Riyadh: Dār Ṭība, 1989), 1:135.

This interpretation was also propounded by many of the exegetes from the early generations (*salaf*). For example, Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah (d. 198/814) was reported to have said:

I used to read this verse and not understand it... I used to say, “This is Qur’an and this is Qur’an, so how can one be better than the other? Until it was explained to me, and it became clear: “We bring better than it for you,” meaning easier for you, lighter for you, and gentler for you.¹²

Al-Ṭabarī applies a similar concept to the names of Allah, maintaining that it is impermissible to assert that some of His names are better or greater than others. According to al-Ṭabarī, the significance of the “greatest name of God” is equivalent to the description “great,” as all of God’s names hold equal greatness. The variation lies in the state of individuals during supplication, so the term “greatest name” relates to the spiritual condition of the worshiper rather than suggesting that the name is inherently superior to all others.¹³

Ibn Ḥibbān comments on the Prophet’s description of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* as the greatest chapter of the Qur’an saying, “By that, he, Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him, meant [it is greatest] in reward and not that parts of the Qur’an are better than others.”¹⁴ Ibn Ḥibbān reported in his *Sunan* the hadith in which the Prophet said to one of his companions, “Shall I not inform you of the best of the Qur’an?” Ibn Ḥibbān adds that the Prophet’s statement means ‘Shall I not inform you of the best part of the Qur’an for you?’ and not that some parts of the Qur’an are better than others, “because the speech of Allah cannot have disparities in excellence.”¹⁵

The argument of the first opinion can be summarized as follows. Firstly, the entirety of the Qur’an constitutes the speech of Allah, which, in terms of His attribute of speech, is inherently indivisible in merit. This perspective aligns with what al-Darrāj alleges to be the consensus. Al-Ash‘arī further elaborated that the

¹² Abū ‘Abd Allah Muḥammad ibn Naṣr al-Marwazī, *al-Sunnah*, ed. ‘Abd Allah al-Buṣayrī (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āshimah li-l-Nashr wal-Tawzī‘, 2001), 186.

¹³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, 17:68–69. I could not locate the exact quote in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*.

¹⁴ ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ibn Balbān al-Fārisī, *al-Iḥsān fī taqrīb ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūt, 18 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, n.d.), 3:57.

¹⁵ Al-Fārisī, *al-Iḥsān*, 3:52.

indivisible nature of Allah's speech does not contradict its potential to encompass infinite significations. Additionally, verses referring to Allah's speech as "words" utilize the plural form to denote greatness and magnificence rather than plurality. The unity of Allah is manifested in His eternal and beginningless attribute of speech, which remains singular.¹⁶ Al-Bāqillānī also emphasizes this point, stating that one part of what is eternal cannot be preferred over another part of itself, nor can it be described as divisible. Rather, what is divisible is the act of recitation, not the essence of the speech.¹⁷

Secondly, the compositional structure (*naẓm*) of the Qur'an exhibits a uniformly unique quality, despite encompassing various aspects of inimitable literary forms. The Qur'an employs several of these forms to convey narratives, admonitions, laws, morals, arguments, promises, threats, and other objectives. However, despite this wide spectrum of discourse modes and diversity of literary devices, no discernible disparity exists. In contrast, literary professionals vary in their poetic skills and levels of descriptive excellence depending on the rhetorical purpose they pursue, such as praise, satire, eulogy, or romance. Thus, from this perspective, no disparity is evident in the Qur'an.¹⁸

Thirdly, the concept of superiority implies the imperfection of the lesser entity, a notion that poses challenges when applied to the Qur'an.¹⁹ Therefore, as indicated by several authorities cited earlier, terms such as "greater" (*aẓam*) and "more meritorious" (*afḍal*), which are found in the Qur'an or Prophetic traditions to describe portions of the Qur'an, ought to be understood as "great" and "meritorious" instead. Any suggested differentiation can only be conceptualized as subjectively related to the human interaction with the text, in terms of certain parts of the Qur'an being more beneficial, rewarding, or easier to apply in their lives compared to others.

¹⁶ Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fūrak, *Maqālāt al-shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī imam ahl al-sunna*, ed. Aḥmad al-Sāyih (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2005), 67.

¹⁷ Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, *al-Inṣāf fī mā yajib i'tiqāduh wa lā yajūz al-jahl bih*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Azhariyya li-l-Turāth, 2000), 97.

¹⁸ Al-Bāqillānī profoundly elaborated on this point in *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, ed. al-Sayyid Ṣaqr, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 36–38.

¹⁹ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Tidhkār*, 45.

The second opinion: Some parts of the Qur'an are more meritorious than others

The second viewpoint, recognized as the majority opinion, was described by al-Qurṭubī (d. 656/1258) as “the true” (*ḥaqq*) stance in this discussion, with Ibn al-Ḥaṣṣār (d. 610/1213) expressing astonishment at those who claim disagreement on this issue despite textual indications of preference.²⁰ Al-Ghazālī, a prominent advocate of this perspective, devoted a brief chapter in his book *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* [The Jewels of the Qur'an] to this subject, serving as an introduction to subsequent chapters discussing the merits of *Sūrahs al-Fātiḥa*, *al-Ikhlāṣ*, and *Yāsīn*, as well as the verse of *al-Kursī*. In this chapter, he states:

Perhaps you will ask me: In these remarks you intend to state that some parts of the Qur'an are more excellent than others, whereas all are the speech of God (may He be exalted!). So how can some parts be distinguished from others and how can some parts be more excellent than others?

[As a reply to this question] know that if the light of insight (*nūr al-baṣīra*) does not guide you to the difference between the Verse of the Throne and a verse concerning giving and receiving loans, and between the *Sūrah* of Sincerity and the *Sūrah* of Destruction, and your mind which is empty and wholly absorbed in blindly following the opinions of others (*taqlīd*) lives in the comfort of mere belief in such differences, then follow the Messenger of God (may His blessing and greeting be upon him!), who is the man to whom the Qur'an was revealed. Prophetic traditions have pointed to the nobility of some verses and to the manifold multiplication of reward for recitation in the case of some revealed *sūrahs*.

Thus the Prophet (may God bless him and greet him!) said, “The *Sūrah* of the Opening of the Book is the best *sūrah* of the Qur'an.” He (may God bless him and greet him!) also said, “The Verse of the Throne is the chief of the Qur'anic verses.” He (may God bless him and greet him!) further said, “The *Sūrah* of Yāsīn is the heart of the Qur'an, and the *sūrah* beginning with ‘Say: He is God, the One is equal to a third of

²⁰ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyya, 7 vols. (Medina: Mujaṃma' al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā'at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 2005), 6:2140.

the Qur'an in respect of value." There are innumerable Traditions regarding the excellence of the striking verses of the Qur'an [*Qawāri' al-Qur'ān*] and regarding the specification of some verses and *sūrahs* as excellent and also regarding the great reward of their recitation. Seek them, if you like, from books on Tradition.²¹

The argument of the second opinion can be summarized as follows. Firstly, numerous prophetic reports indicate the superiority or special merit of certain parts of the Qur'an. Secondly, the verse concerning abrogation can be interpreted as replacing a verse with a better one. Legal theory debates on whether the Sunnah can abrogate the Qur'an incorporated discussions about the superiority of portions of revelation over others based on various interpretations of the abrogation verse.²² Thirdly, multiple verses of the Qur'an describe portions of the revelation as "best" (*aḥsan*), such as "And follow the best of what was revealed to you from your Lord"²³ and "Those who listen to speech and follow the best of it."²⁴ Additionally, the Israelites were instructed to "take the best" of the revelation received by Moses from Allah on the tablets.²⁵

Fourthly, the Qur'an is deemed superior to the Torah and the Gospel, although all three are considered the words of Allah. Allah states, "And We have revealed to you the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it."²⁶ Many early exegetes interpreted the phrase "criterion over it" (*muhayminan 'alayh*) to signify the Qur'an's role as the entrusted overseer of the previous scriptures, indicating a higher ranking. In this context, the Gospel is not considered on equal footing with, for example, the Torah or the Psalms.²⁷

²¹ Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad al-Qabbānī, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm, 1990), 62–63. The translation is quoted from Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Jewels of the Qur'ān: Al-Ghazālī's Theory* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1977), 64–65.

²² Legal theorists held differing opinions on whether the Sunnah can abrogate the Qur'an. The majority opinion, which supports this view, argues that it is not the Qur'anic text itself that is abrogated, but rather the legal ruling of a verse. This perspective is based on the belief that all Qur'anic verses hold equal value, making it conceivable for a law derived from the Sunnah to supersede a law established by the Qur'an. See for example, Sharaf al-Dīn al-Ṭībī, *Futūḥ al-ghayb fī al-kashf 'an qinā' al-rayb*, ed. Muḥammad Sulṭān al-'Ulamā' et al., 17 vols. (Dubai: Jā'izat Dubai al-Dawliyya li-l-Qur'ān al-Karīm, 2013) 3:30–39.

²³ Qur'an 39:55.

²⁴ Qur'an 39:18.

²⁵ Qur'an 7:145.

²⁶ Qur'an 5:48.

²⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, 17:43.

Finally, the requirement for *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* to be recited as an obligatory component of prayer, alongside numerous reports detailing its special merits, indicates its superiority over other parts of the Qur'an. This correlation was explicitly articulated by some jurists, such as al-Sam'ānī (d. 489/1096), who expounds on the Shāfi'ī school's stance regarding the obligatory recitation of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* in prayer, stating,

Our colleagues have stated that the recitation of the Qur'an in prayer, being obligatory, requires the designation of *al-Fātiḥa*. This is because the Qur'an is distinguished from other texts by its miraculousness (*i'jāz*), and the minimum requirement to establish *i'jāz* is a *sūrah*. This *sūrah* [*al-Fātiḥa*] is the noblest of *sūrahs* as it comprises the 'seven oft-repeated verses' (*al-sab' al-mathānī*) and can serve as a substitute for all other *sūrahs*, whereas not all *sūrahs* can substitute for it. Moreover, it encompasses aspects such as praise, glorification, seeking help, seeking refuge, and supplication from the servant to the Lord, which are not encompassed by other *sūrahs* of equivalent length. Therefore, when this *sūrah* is the noblest of *sūrahs* and prayer is the noblest of states, then the noblest of *sūrahs* becomes necessary in the noblest of states.²⁸

Abū Ya'lā al-Farrā' (d. 458/1066) echoes a similar response in representing the Ḥanbalī school's opinion on the obligation of reciting *al-Fātiḥa* in prayer. He asserted that three proofs establish the noble status of *al-Fātiḥa*: textual authorities in prophetic traditions, rational inference regarding the *sūrah*'s position, and legal practice. Besides the Prophetic reports attesting to the merits of *al-Fātiḥa*, Allah has paralleled it with the entire Qur'an, as He stated: "And We have certainly given you seven of the often repeated [verses] and the great Qur'an." This signifies a reality unmatched by any other *sūrah*. Legally, *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* should be recited in every *rak'a*, with consequences for misreading it during prayer.²⁹

²⁸ Abū al-Muzaffar Manṣūr ibn Muḥammad al-Sam'ānī, *al-Iṣṣilām fī al-khilāf bayn al-imāmayn al-Shāfi'ī wa-Abī Ḥanīfa*, ed. Nāyif al-'Amrī, 3 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1992), 1:208–9.

²⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, 17:14–17. I could not locate this in Abū Ya'lā's available books.

A third, reconciliatory approach

The debate over whether different Qur’anic verses possess varying levels of merit, as illustrated by the arguments of both viewpoints, seems to be primarily semantic. One perspective emphasizes viewing the Qur’an as the direct speech of God, thus negating the possibility of verses having varying levels of merit, while the other considers external factors that may assign additional worldly or spiritual value to certain verses based on human engagement with God’s speech. Thus, any perceived superiority is considered a non-essential attribute of specific verses, rather than an inherent quality that establishes a hierarchy of excellence within the Qur’an itself.³⁰

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1071) notes that the concern over ascribing differing levels of value to the Qur’an led some scholars to interpret reports about the superiority of certain *sūrahs* figuratively. However, he continues, the promise of reward for performing an act does not necessarily imply the inherent merit of the act itself; rather, it indicates God’s benevolence towards whomever He chooses from among His servants. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr references the example of the abrogation verse, highlighting that exegetes did not disagree that its meaning, “We bring forth one better than it,” is intended for the believers, not indicating that the verse is inherently better than others. Amidst his discussion of the meaning of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* being equivalent to one-third of the Qur’an, he remarks, “All of this has been stated by the people of Sunnah, independent reasoning (*ra’y*), and Hadith. However, I say that silence on this matter, and matters similar to it, is better and safer than speaking about them.”³¹

This multi-perspective approach has been adopted by numerous scholars. An early example of this approach can be found in Abū Ḥanīfā’s *al-Fiqh al-akbar*:

The verses of the Qur’an, being Allah’s speech, are all equal in excellence and greatness. Some, however, have a pre-eminence in regard to recitation or to their contents; e.g., the verse of the Throne,

³⁰ Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Kaṭībī, *al-Ghurra al-wāḍiḥa fī tafsīr al-Fātiḥa*, ed. ‘Alī ‘Abdel Majīd al-Azharī (Cairo: Dār al-Iḥsān, 2017), 92.

³¹ Yūsuf ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istidhkār al-Jāmi’ li-madhāhib fuqahā’ al-amṣār*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu’īṭ Qal‘ajī, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār Qutayba lil-Ṭibā’a wal-Nashr, 1993), 8:116–7.

because it deals with Allah's majesty, His greatness and His description. So in it are united excellence in regard to recitation and excellence in regard to contents. Others possess excellence only in regard to recitation, such as the descriptions of the infidels, whereas those who are mentioned in them, that is, the infidels, have no excellence. Likewise, all of Allah's names and qualities are equal in greatness and excellence, without difference.³²

Similarly, when Ishāq ibn Rāhawayh (d. 238/853) was asked about the significance of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* being regarded as equivalent to one third of the Qur'an, his response was:

Its meaning is that when Allah distinguished His speech over all other speech, He also made some of it superior in reward for those who recite it, as an encouragement to teach it; not that whoever recites "Say: He is Allah, the One" three times is like one who recites the entire Qur'an.³³ This is not valid even if they recite "Say: He is Allah, the One" two hundred times.³⁴

These observations prompt the following questions: what is the meaning of "Qur'an" in relation to God's speech and the conceptual understanding of superiority (*tafḍīl*) and its origins? In theological discourse, the term Qur'an encompasses two aspects: God's eternal attribute of speech and the verbal expressions present in human recitation. This duality reflects both the concept of God's beginningless, unuttered speech and the temporally uttered recitations of humans. This is illustrated in the verses: "Whenever any fresh (*muḥḍath*) revelation comes to them from their Lord, they listen to it playfully,"³⁵ and "To

³² Abū Ḥanīfā al-Nu'mān, "al-Fiqh al-akbar," in *al-Aqīda wa-ilm al-kalam*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2004), 623–24. The translation is retrieved from A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 196 (emphasis added).

³³ If understood as equating the recitation of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* to a third of the Qur'an, some scholars argue that these reports indicate such estimation independently, not in addition to other chapters whose virtue is reported to be equivalent, for example, to a quarter of the Qur'an in virtue. This interpretation prevents the sum of these fractions from exceeding the entirety of the Qur'an. Furthermore, this quantified reward may be interpreted as referring to a third of the Qur'an without including *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* itself in the calculation. See for example, 'Alī ibn 'Alī al-Shabrāmālīsī and Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Rashīdī, *Ḥāshiya 'alā nihāyat al-muḥtāj ilā sharḥ al-minhāj*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2003) 2:117.

³⁴ Ishāq ibn Maṣṣūr al-Marwazī, *Masā'il al-Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal wa Ishāq ibn Rāhawayh*, 1st ed., 10 vols. (Medina: al-Jāmi'ah al-Islāmiyya, 2004), 9:4611–13; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istidhkār*, 8:117–18.

³⁵ Qur'an 21:2.

Moses God spoke directly.”³⁶

Therefore, the crux of the debate revolves around God’s attribute of speech and the affirmation of the uniformity of all His attributes—a principle upheld by all Muslim theologians. It is likely that some proponents of the first opinion, which emphasizes the equality of all parts of the Qur’an, were cautious of the Mu‘tazilite perspective on the createdness of the Qur’an. In his commentary on the abrogation verse, al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) noted that the Mu‘tazilites used this verse to argue that if certain parts of the Qur’an are superior to others, then the Qur’an cannot be eternal (*qadīm*).³⁷ The Sunni response to this argument lies in distinguishing between two aspects of speech: the speaker and the spoken. Speech may emanate from a single speaker and, from this perspective, possesses a singular level of superiority. However, this does not preclude the existence of varying degrees of significance within the different parts of the spoken content.

This leads to the second question concerning the applicability of superiority to non-essential aspects of God’s attributes, a perspective that finds agreement among both groups of scholars. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥalīmī (d. 403/1012) outlined five aspects of the superiority of certain verses over others.

- Firstly, the implementation of one verse may be prioritized and prove more beneficial for people than another verse. Verses containing commands, prohibitions, promises, or threats, for instance, may be deemed superior to those narrating stories, as directive speech is generally more conducive to fulfilling objectives.
- Secondly, verses incorporating Allah’s names and magnificent attributes are considered superior due to the inherent significance of their subject matter.
- Thirdly, certain chapters and verses are esteemed over others because their recitation yields immediate benefits beyond the spiritual rewards expected in the afterlife. For example, reciting verses such as *al-Kursī* or the Protectors (*al-Mu‘awwidhatayn*), the final two chapters of the Qur’an, not only earns

³⁶ Qur’an 4:164. See Nūr al-Dīn Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ sharḥ Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ*, ed. Jamāl ‘Aytānī, 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001), 5:3–4.

³⁷ Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥf al-kabīr*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 2:252.

the reciter spiritual rewards for performing an act of worship but also provides immediate protection against potential evils.

- Fourthly, Allah may multiply the reward for reciting particular *sūrahs* even when we do not fully comprehend the distinct qualities these *sūrahs* possess. This is analogous to how Allah may designate certain times and places as having special significance not found in others. For instance, one day or month might be considered holier than another, making worship during these times more significant and sinning therein more serious than at other times. Similarly, the Holy Mosque in Mecca holds a superior status to other places due to the unique rituals performed there, and the reward for praying within its precincts is multiplied.
- Finally, the Qur'an is distinguished from the Torah, the Gospel, and the Psalms by several unique qualities, including worship through its recitation, reward for its recitation, its provision of definitive knowledge, and its status as the Prophet's miracle and evidence against his people.³⁸

Hence, superiority of some verses over others is not related to Allah's eternal attributes. Rather, it emanates from an external source, such as the subject matter, the incorporation of numerous unique meanings, and God's generosity in rewarding the reciter based on their unique experiential state. A notable example illustrating the significance of subject matter is the comparison between *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* and *Sūrat al-Masad* (The Palm Fiber). As highlighted by al-'Izz ibn 'Abd al-Salām (d. 660/1262), "Allah's discourse about Himself surpasses His discourse about others."³⁹ Consequently, is it appropriate to assert that '*Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* is superior to *Sūrat al-Masad*'? Each *sūrah* serves a distinct purpose, addressing different themes, and thus possesses its own context of excellence and refinement. In addressing this misdirected question of comparison, Shams al-Dīn al-Khuwayyī (d. 637/1240) argues that the excellence of each *sūrah* within its context is more comprehensive than in the context of the other. This is because evaluating the excellence of both *sūrahs* outside their contexts equates mentioning Allah with mentioning Abū Lahab and equates monotheism with invoking damnation upon the disbeliever, which is indeed inappropriate. Instead, it should be recognized that

³⁸ Al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḥalīmī, *Kitāb al-minhāj fī shu'ab al-īmān*, ed. Ḥilmī Muḥammad Fūda, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1979), 2:244–45.

³⁹ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 6:2141.

“May the hands of Abū Lahab be ruined” constitutes an unparalleled supplication for loss, just as “Say: He is Allah, the One” represents the most articulate expression of monotheism. Hence, when considering the context of each verse, it cannot be claimed that one is more eloquent than the other.⁴⁰

Another example that illustrates multifaceted comparison and emphasizes the incorporation of diverse meanings involves comparing the verse of *al-Kursī* and *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*. Scholarly reflections on their merits confirm the multi-perspective approach alongside subjective interpretive and experiential encounters with the Qur’an. The verse of *al-Kursī* holds the esteemed status of being the greatest among verses due to its profound content. Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 543/1148) elucidates that something is honored by the honor of its essence, implications, and associations. Therefore, the position of the verse of *al-Kursī* among the Qur’an’s verses parallels the position of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* among its *sūrahs*.⁴¹ Al-Ghazālī mentions that the verse of *al-Kursī* is deemed the greatest of all verses because it encapsulates the essence, attributes, and actions of Allah, and nothing else. Understanding these three aspects is the paramount goal of knowledge, while everything else is secondary to it.⁴² Ibn al-Munayyir (d. 683/1284) referenced his grandfather, Kamāl al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Fāris, who emphasized that the verse of *al-Kursī* encompasses unique aspects not found in any other verse, as it contains approximately twenty-two instances where the name of Allah is explicitly or implicitly mentioned.⁴³

Nonetheless, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr points out that *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* surpasses it in two aspects. Firstly, being a *sūrah* holds greater significance than a single verse, as the Qur’anic challenge (*taḥaddī*) can only be presented to opponents by presenting a complete *sūrah* to establish the inimitability of the Qur’anic text and the veracity of the Prophet’s message.⁴⁴ Secondly, *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* establishes monotheism in

⁴⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 6:2141–42.

⁴¹ Abū Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī, *Qānūn al-ta’wīl*, ed. Muḥammad al-Sulaymānī, 1st ed. (Jeddah: Dār al-Qibla li-l-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1086), 545–46.

⁴² Al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, 73.

⁴³ Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Mansṣūr ibn al-Munayyir, *al-Intiṣāf*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 1:302.

⁴⁴ Scholars held differing views regarding the minimum number of Qur’anic verses necessary to establish the inimitability of the entire text. Some Mu’tazilites argued that the entirety of the Qur’an demonstrates its inimitability, while others contended that it must be at least a complete *sūrah*, regardless of its length. Yet another perspective posited that either a *sūrah* or its equivalent in speech, whereby the distinction in eloquence becomes

fifteen letters, whereas the verse of *al-Kursī* does so in fifty letters, thus demonstrating the miraculous style of conveying a profound message in fifty letters and then condensing it to fifteen.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The debate surrounding the varying levels of merit among Qur'anic verses reflects a multifaceted theological framework. While some scholars emphasize the equality of all parts of the Qur'an, attributing significance solely to the holistic nature of God's speech, others argue for the superiority of certain verses based on prophetic reports and, arguably, the Qur'an's own description of itself. Examining these debates offers valuable insights into the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an, highlighting the dynamic interplay between theological principles, legal theory, and linguistic analysis. These discussions are not merely intellectual exercises; they demonstrate a scholarly commitment to a comprehensive theological framework that fully acknowledges the transcendence of Allah and His attributes while consistently adhering to Prophetic reports.

Furthermore, they illustrate the meticulous attention scholars pay to the minutest details of the text and tradition, ensuring that every argument is substantiated by robust evidence rather than merely the authority of the speaker. This adherence to evidence-based reasoning underscores the freedom within Islamic scholarship to disagree respectfully, provided the disagreement is rooted in sound argumentation and evidence. The ongoing debate also reflects a widely shared framework of what constitutes a valid argument in Islamic scholarship, fostering a tradition where differing perspectives are valued and rigorously analyzed. This multidisciplinary approach not only underscores the richness of the Islamic tradition but also encourages Muslims to deeply reflect on the Qur'an, its position, and its merits in diverse ways. By engaging with these scholarly debates, Muslims can appreciate the depth and breadth of their intellectual heritage, fostering a nuanced and profound understanding of their faith.

apparent, can establish the inimitability. Various other opinions on this matter have also been documented. For further exploration, see al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'an*, 254; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 5:1896.

⁴⁵ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Qānūn al-ta'wīl*, 546.