



The Unique Storytelling Style of the Qur'an

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

We find that stories constitute approximately one third of the Noble Qur'an, the greatest Book of guidance ever revealed to the world. And in its greatest chapter (*al-Fātiḥah*), we are taught to pray for guidance by alluding to the stories of those “favored by God”¹ with guidance to the Straight Path before us. These scriptural phenomena validate the immense power of stories to move hearts and minds, dispelling the faulty assumption that stories are just for children or that incorporating them into our discourse detracts from its intellectual vigor. However, the Qur'an did not just validate storytelling. It proceeded to identify its own stories as unique and most potent for reforming its readers into the best versions of themselves. This paper explores why the Qur'anic style of storytelling is one that, while rather unconventional for some people, is replete with wisdom indicative of its Divine origins.

Storytelling at its finest

“We relate to you, [O Muhammad], the best of stories in what We have revealed to you of this Qur'an.”² Should we infer from this noble verse that the account of Prophet Joseph (as) which unfolds in the very next verses, is the single greatest Qur'anic story? Some scholars have argued this, but it is rather unlikely for many reasons—not the least of which is the multitude of Qur'anic references to the life and mission of Moses (as). Should we then infer that all the stories God chose to include in the Qur'an equally count as the “best of stories”? This seems to be the stronger position, but not the full explanation. Exegetes of the Qur'an point out that Allah did not say in this verse that He relates to us the best *qīṣaṣ* (stories), but rather the best *qaṣaṣ* (storytelling).³ In other words, Allah not only makes the ideal choices on which stories to tell, but also tells them in the most ideal way. And just as the “prologue” of *Sūrah Yūsuf* identifies the Qur'anic style of storytelling as best, its “epilogue” elaborates further with Allah's words,

¹ See: Qur'an 1:7.

² Qur'an 12:3 (*Saheeh International* translation).

³ See: Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū' al-Fatāwā* (Madinah, KSA: King Fahd Complex, 1995), 17:18-22.

There was certainly in their stories (1) a lesson (2) for those of understanding. (3) Never was it [i.e., the Qur'an] a narration invented, but a confirmation of what was before it and (4) a detailed explanation of all things and guidance and mercy for a people who believe.⁴

This verse deepens our understanding about some important features of Qur'anic storytelling, and why its methodology best serves the Qur'an's ultimate objective of offering “guidance and mercy for those who believe.” It built on the preexisting affinity for storytelling gatherings in Arabia and in every known human civilization (even today, albeit in the form of film and television above all), and then elevated its function to serve the loftiest of all purposes: heeding the Divine call.

1. Lesson-oriented

While the Qur'an is remarkably captivating, Allah (the Glorified and Majestic) makes it crystal clear that His wondrous words did not penetrate the barriers of this universe to simply fascinate us. Rather, it is *al-Qawl al-Faṣl* (the Decisive Word),⁵ here to set the record straight on sacred truths, establish measures of justice, and pass final verdicts for humanity on the ethical framework approved by Almighty God. This does not, however, preclude it from being a tapestry of Divine art that creatively guides people towards lessons that aid them in embracing these truths and teachings for their betterment in this world and the next. In that vein, the stories of the Qur'an are articulated and situated in ways that best elucidate for us the prescribed laws of the Divine, and motivate us to align ourselves with them.

As Muḥammad ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973), an esteemed contemporary specialist of the Qur'an, explains in *al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr*, Qur'anic storytelling does not qualify as the “best storytelling” solely because it is lesson-based, or because it restricts itself only to true stories. After all, there are many non-Qur'anic stories that are true, and from which valuable lessons can be derived. What makes Qur'anic storytelling exceptional is its efficacy in carving—not just introducing—its timeless lessons into the worldview of its readers and listeners, and steadily strengthening their interest in imbibing them.⁶ People tend to tell stories in ways that offer little

⁴ Qur'an 12:111 (*Saheeh International* translation, with added numbering).

⁵ Qur'an 86:13 (*The Clear Quran*).

⁶ Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-taḥrīr wal-tanwīr* (Tunisia: Dār al-Tūnisīyah lil-Nashr, 1984), 1:64.

benefit—stories that either entertain without purpose, or that bury their purpose under superfluous details that weaken their potency for moral refinement. These were among the reasons why traditional scholars often wrote works cautioning against “professional” storytellers.⁷ The Qur'an, however, is not just lesson-based; it is lesson-oriented and lesson-orienting. In order to inculcate rather than merely preach its moral vision—to not just explain ethics to its readers, but to *make* them ethical—it departs from the storytelling approach to which so many of us are accustomed.

Quite often, for instance, the Qur'an omits the names of people and their lineages, as well as the names of towns and their locations, in distinct contrast to the historical and biographical works with which we are familiar. These omissions are “by design,” for they better enable the reader to focus on the lesson itself, and not restrict its relevance to some transient moment in the annals of history.⁸ So why does the Qur'an not clearly tell us, for instance, whether or not earlier humans ever coexisted with dinosaurs, or what the birthname was for the “believer from Pharaoh's family,” or where the cave of the “Seven Sleepers” is located? Perhaps His perfect knowledge of how easily excess information distracts us is part of the wisdom for such facts being redacted. Did not theologians historically debate, at great lengths, what kind of fruit the Forbidden Tree produced in the story of Adam (as), despite that being of no beneficial consequence? Did not the assumed location of certain pious figures' graves lead to the erection of shrines at which the deceased are invoked instead of God, the only All-Hearing? Did not the historical emphasis on ancestry in religious scriptures lead to doctrines that perpetuated “elite bloodlines” in ways antithetical to God's justice? Qur'anic stories therefore come with an infinitely wise framing, one that assists us both by what they include and what they exclude, sealing shut inlets to misguidance, and thus keeping history's darker chapters from repeating themselves.

Consider how Allah reclaims the distorted narrative of the “Seven Sleepers” in the cave. At the onset, He declares, “It is We who relate to you their story in truth.

⁷ See: Ibn al-Jawzī's *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wal-mudhakkirīn*, al-Ḥāfiẓ al-'Irāqī's *al-Bā'ith 'ala al-khalāṣ min ḥawādith al-quṣṣāṣ*, and al-Suyūṭī's *Taḥdhīr al-khawāṣ min akādhīb al-quṣṣāṣ*.

⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:66.

Indeed, they were youths who believed in their Lord...”⁹ In other words, Allah tells us, discard the framing of those Jews who nationalized their religion and considered ethnic roots the ultimate determinant of human value; it was rather them being youth who had their whole lives ahead of them, and them choosing faith despite facing religious persecution, that was of paramount importance and worthy of celebration, not their “coincidental” belonging to one ancestry or another. As the story progresses, we find that not only will the names and ages of these young heroes remain undisclosed, but that Allah is delivering a clear caution against any polemical debates pertaining to their number; “Say [O Muhammad], my Lord is best aware of their number. None know them save a few. So contend not concerning them except an outward contending.”¹⁰ In other words, only dispute over this in ways that do not get under your skin, since such facts are neither strongly evidenced nor very consequential. And finally, at the climax of their story, we are guided to focus on the great sign of God’s power in reviving these sleepers three centuries later: “That is how We caused them to be discovered so that their people might know that Allah’s promise [of resurrection] is true and that there is no doubt about the Hour.”¹¹ Therefore, it is Divine grace that we are not teased away from the primordial truth of God’s power here by the year of this historic event, nor by the name of the city they stumbled into with their archaic silver coins, nor by the geographical coordinates of the cave to which these righteous youth were tracked and ultimately discovered.

This distinctive feature (lesson-orientation) brings us to some of the wisdoms behind the narrative repetition we find in the Qur'an. Badr al-Dīn ibn Jamā'ah (d. 1333), for instance, authored a work entitled *al-Muqtanaṣ* which presents seven benefits of the repetition of certain stories.¹² One wisdom lies in the fact that Qur'anic storytelling, much like preaching, is often didactic in nature. It would be odd to ask a preacher, “I recall you mentioning this personality in a sermon last year; why are you repeating yourself?” when the respective context each time justified it. Similarly, the Qur'an may reference the same story whenever the

⁹ Qur'an 18:13 (*The Clear Quran*).

¹⁰ Qur'an 18:22 (Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, with slight adaptation).

¹¹ Qur'an 18:21 (*The Clear Quran*).

¹² While *al-Muqtanaṣ fī fawā'id tiktār al-qaṣaṣ* is nonextant, these seven benefits have been preserved for us by al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) in *al-Itqān* and al-Zarkashī (d. 1392) in *al-Burhān*.

context benefits from its presence, and whenever that repetition helps lodge the intended lesson in the reader's soul.¹³

In response to the question of why the Qur'an "repeats itself," it is difficult to resist the urge to say, "Because you need to be told a thousand times to clean your room." We have a little child inside us all, and a messy room inside all our minds and hearts. Just like the child, we too need a wise and methodical approach to work past our inexperience and impatience, one that can effectively wean us off our myopic tendencies to try everything firsthand, and to impulsively grab whatever we want when we want it. Otherwise, our potential optimism bias (false sense of security) about everything, or our dependence on instant gratification, will negatively impact every dimension of our wellbeing—be it physical, mental, emotional, financial, or spiritual. With their wise and consistent messaging, the stories of the Qur'an do just that: they rescue us from our crippling naivety, compel us to acknowledge reality, and inculcate within us the incentives to engage it prudently. The elderly often admit that their lifespans were in fact too short to allow for the timely discovery of such treasures.

The Creator of the human psyche knows our need for reinforcement through repetition. Without a vivid recollection and regular reiteration of these stories, we would never internalize them nor recognize the subtle threads between them—and thus our busy lives may very well erode even their most priceless lessons. We can all recall profound moments of pause in our lives—moments when time seemed to stop, or we wished it would. Whether these moments were like an invigorating rainfall of intense gratitude, or a devastating sledgehammer that left us feeling shattered beyond repair, life went on and those showers abated and those pains were sedated. Thus is the destiny of man, as the Prophet ﷺ said: "Adam forgot, and so too will his progeny forget."¹⁴ Hence, we find Qur'anic stories accounting for the inherent deficiency of human memory, puncturing the nearly impervious stone of our ego with a steady stream of droplets spanning days, months, and years, rather than a short-lived downpour that rinses the dust off of the stone's surface but causes no meaningful change therein. As Allah says, "The disbelievers say, 'If only

¹³ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, 68.

¹⁴ *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, nos. 3076 and 3367, *hasan* chain according to al-Tirmidhi.

the Qur'an had been sent down to him all at once!' [We have sent it] as such [in stages] so We may strengthen your heart with it. And thus, We have revealed it at a deliberate pace."¹⁵

A second wisdom behind the repetition found in the Qur'an is to evidence its linguistic brilliance. Authors often shy away from theme repetition, in fear of sounding redundant, while the Qur'an exhibits a unique boldness in doing the very opposite. Experts of Arabic often express their intrigue with how the Qur'an "repeats itself" with such artistic variation that its rhetorical richness remains unblemished and its appeal undiminished. The Qur'an somehow avoids misstating the facts of each story despite employing variant wordings in each "retelling." It also intersperses nuggets of additional nuance in some iterations of a story, and subtracts them from others, without compromising the overall integrity and coherence of the accounts. Hence, a closer examination of this "repetition" often reveals impeccable subtleties and nuanced distinctions that boast of the linguistic mastery of the Qur'an while offering further enlightenment and refinement to inclining souls.

Alongside noting these three complexities (versatility, consistency, and coherence), we should appreciate how this linguistic sophistication is compounded further by the Qur'an's original status as a spoken corpus, not a written work, with a compositional structure without precedent in pre-Qur'anic Arabia. Ibn 'Āshūr asserts that elaborate, story-driven dialoguing, as found in the Qur'an, was nonexistent in the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia. Hence, one of the benefits of including stories in the Qur'an was that, without them, the master poets of Arabia could have attempted to hide their inability to meet the Qur'anic challenge to "produce its like" by avoiding interactive dialogue.¹⁶ Perhaps it was the linguistic guardrails that tightly governed their poetry's structure and synonym counts that forced them to invoke brief imagery and passing analogies but not conversation-centric storylines. Whatever the reason, it's as if the Qur'an is declaring to the Shakespeares of every civilization:¹⁷ I've diversified the styles of

¹⁵ Qur'an 25:32 (*The Clear Quran*, with adaptation).

¹⁶ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, 66.

¹⁷ Contrary to the claim of some Orientalists that the Qur'an as a linguistic masterpiece is no different than the celebrated sonnets of Shakespeare and *Iliad* of Homer, see here ten major literary differences between the Qur'an

storytelling for you, and yet, the eternal challenge to wield your languages in any one of these ways is still unmet.

A third benefit of Qur'anic stories resurfacing in various places is that, while the memorization of the Qur'an is common, most Muslims have historically not committed the entire Book to memory. Even during the Prophet's time, people would visit him ﷺ or his Companions, memorize parts of the Qur'an from them, and then return to their respective hometowns. Therefore, to ensure every believer's familiarity with the Qur'an's paradigmatic stories, regardless of what they have and haven't memorized, these stories are, through repetition, made available throughout the Book.¹⁸

While only some were introduced above, below are the seven insights offered by Ibn Jamā'ah for the repetition we encounter in the stories of the Qur'an:

1. Elucidating the stories gradually with additional nuance each time;
2. Ensuring that believers everywhere, laymen and scholars, are familiar with the major stories of the Qur'an;
3. Displaying the unique eloquence of the Qur'an through compatible portrayals of a single scene through myriad terms;
4. Ensuring maximum reach of its teachings, as people are more motivated to circulate stories than instructions;
5. Humbling the masters of Arabic rhetoric who could not match a single variant of the Qur'anic narratives;
6. Preempting polemicists from claiming that the Qur'an could not reframe its stories in different ways, so why challenge its rejectors to do so?
7. Retaining the readers' interest, who need to immerse themselves in these scenes time and again, by offering a remarkably "fresh" depiction each time.

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and the writings of Shakespeare: Mohammad Elshinawy, *The Final Prophet: Proofs for the Prophethood of Muhammad* (N.p.: Yaqeen Institute, 2022), 186–91.

¹⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, 69.

¹⁹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Lebanon: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), 2:184.

2. For people of understanding

Qur'anic stories are intentionally structured to invite conscious engagement. While part of the onus is on the reader to be thoughtful and reflective to benefit from the Qur'an, its style of composition facilitates an active engagement and alertness to the priceless messages embedded in its stories. As al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108) points out in his historically acclaimed dictionary of Qur'anic terms, stories carrying *'ibrah li-ulī 'l-albāb* (translated as: a lesson for people of understanding) literally implies them being a bridge for the *'ubūr* (crossing over) of their meanings into our lives.²⁰ This uncovers for us some of the wisdom behind breaking up and distributing these stories across the Qur'an: not just for the brevity that refreshes our interest, but also to interrupt the over-immersion that hinders introspection in light of the story at hand. Think of novels and movies; irrespective of whether they are truth or fiction, people often get so absorbed in their storylines that they forget to ask themselves why these accounts make them feel this way, or what they should learn from them for their own lives. This is precisely the attitude that excludes someone from finding their path illuminated by the Qur'an, as Allah says, "Certainly there were in [the account of] Joseph and his brothers signs for those who ask."²¹ It is those *asking* themselves the grand existential questions about life and its purpose, and those *asking* for proof of the Qur'an truly being from Almighty God, who will find the Qur'an and its stories fruitful. Those too indulgent for introspection, or too heedless for reflection, will not. It was once said to Ibn 'Abbās (rA), a cousin of the Prophet ﷺ hailed as *Turjumān al-Qur'ān* (Master Interpreter of the Qur'an), "How did you develop such profound knowledge?" He said, "With an inquisitive tongue and a receptive heart."²²

As Allah says elsewhere, "Indeed in that is a profound reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present [minded]."²³ Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) notes that this verse captures—in the most succinct way—the three factors necessary for any message or story to have an impact. It must have an intrinsic potency for

²⁰ Ḥusayn ibn Muhammad al-Aṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qur'ān* (Mecca: Maktbatat Nazār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz), 1:416.

²¹ Qur'an 12:7 (*The Clear Quran*, brackets added).

²² Ismā'īl ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wal-nihāyah* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1988), 8:329.

²³ Qur'an 50:37.

impact, its “target” must be open to stimulation or impression, and any hindrances between the force and the impact must be removed. “In that is a profound reminder” refers to the intrinsic potency of the Qur’anic narrative. “For whoever has a heart” refers to the sincere soul who is alive and able to comprehend the implications of the message. Finally, “who listens while he is present” refers to mindfulness. So the Qur’an in its entirety (including its stories) will not confer its precious lessons upon those who engage it without actively seeking to understand it.

In another verse, Allah says to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, “So relate the stories that perhaps they will give thought.”²⁴ It is therefore a two-step process, whereby the Qur’an brings people to the ideal reservoir through which they can quench their thirst, but it remains upon them to drink from it. Those who ignore or hastily gloss over the Qur’anic stories will never be quenched by the stream of perspective and inspiration that it brings to others’ lives. An easy example of this are the critics who, driven by their dogmatic defensiveness of their religious traditions, disparage the Qur’an as lacking coherence of composition. This is a generally-held view among some orientalist academics past and present, some of whom even proposed “making the Qur’an more comprehensible” by rearranging its contents thematically.²⁵ But given that this Book is a medium of guidance for “people of understanding,” and this class of people harbor an adamant presumption about its incomprehensibility, they seldom make a genuine attempt to understand it. As a result, studying it only causes them to stray farther and their biases to grow stronger. As Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) says, “We send down in the Qur’an healing and mercy for the believers, but it increases the wrongdoers only in loss.”²⁶

Were it not for their adversarial approach to the Qur’an, they would have been among the “people of understanding” who find each *sūrah* (chapter) a self-contained and unified discourse with one or more central themes. The *sūrah* would then escape its apparent atomism, and each of its stories, instead of seeming like random pivots to irrelevant digressions, would now develop the overarching

²⁴ Qur’an 7:176 (*Saheeh International* translation).

²⁵ See: Mustansir Mir, *Thematic and Structural Coherence in the Qur’an: A Study of Islahi’s Concept of Nazm* (The University of Michigan, 1983), 2–3.

²⁶ Qur’an 17:82 (*The Clear Quran*).

theme for the reader. Which parts of each story are included per *sūrah*, and where they are stationed within that *sūrah*, gradually become context clues to help render it a prized collection of matching pearls on a single necklace, not bulky stones randomly scattered on the ground. For instance, near-identical mention of prior prophets and their hardships came in different contexts with different aims:

1. To console the Prophet ﷺ during moments of intense suffering and abuse;
2. To illustrate the commonality of the call to monotheism by all of God's prophets and messengers;
3. To note the common end of all those who rejected earlier prophets;
4. To caution disbelievers against deluding themselves with baseless, recycled arguments against faith;
5. To precisely disclose "lost knowledge of the distant past" which only the highest caliber scholars among the Israelites remained privy to, etc.

Similarly, the following two verses make a near-symmetrical visit to the "genesis story," while sitting 18 chapters apart, with very different implications:

God is He who created the heavens and the earth and everything between them in six days, and then established Himself on the Throne.²⁷

We created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six days, and no fatigue touched Us.²⁸

In isolation, these distinct passages seem to carry near-identical implications. But in their contexts, each is clearly and perfectly situated to solidify a different and independent truth. The first is that man should never doubt the omnipotence of the Almighty and His power to resurrect the dead with ease (a clear theme throughout *Sūrah al-Sajdah*). The second (in *Sūrah Qāf*) is that you (O Prophet ﷺ) can find the resilience to rise above the insults others hurl by recalling that God who, after creating the cosmos in six days, tolerated those who accused Him of needing to rest from exhaustion on the seventh day. As the next verse in *Sūrah Qāf* continues,

²⁷ Qur'an 32:4 (*The Clear Quran*).

²⁸ Qur'an 50:38 (*The Clear Quran*).

“...so endure what they say and proclaim the praises of your Lord before the rising of the sun, and before sunset.”²⁹

In his compendium on Qur'anic sciences, Ibn 'Aqīlah al-Makkī (d. 1738) marvels at how the Qur'an repurposes many of the same stories, simply by couching them (sometimes with subtle rewordings) in new contexts, to saliently bolster a vast multitude of unrelated concepts. He then invoked the analogy of how scholars continue their exceptional praise of Imam al-Bukhārī (d. 870) for the masterful design of his hadith compilation; specifically how al-Bukhārī would classify the same prophetic tradition under several headings due to the spectrum of inferences he was capable of extrapolating from a single concise hadith.³⁰ Of course, the immeasurable disparity between al-Bukhārī and the Creator of his extraordinary intelligence is a given. Similar to Ibn 'Aqīlah's line of thought, Ibn 'Abdīn says, “If you see something that appears repetitive in the Qur'an, look deeper into it. Take note of what came before it, and after it, so that its purpose may disclose itself to you.”³¹

Another notable aspect of Qur'anic discourse is its multilayered meanings, whereby several implications are simultaneously made by the same story or scene. In *Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ*, for instance, we are told about Prophet Moses (as), “Then one of the two women came to him, walking bashfully. She said, ‘My father is inviting you...’”³² We can stop at *bashfully*, (as translated above), which would make this adverb a description of her demeanor of walking. However, we can also pause at *walking*, which would turn *bashfully* into a qualifier of the following verb, rendering it a description of the modest manner in which she spoke.³³ Were it not for the deliberate and subtle syntactic placement of *bashfully*—just after *walking* and just before *saying*—it would not have succinctly straddled both implications simultaneously as it does. This brilliant and clear display of eloquence is a

²⁹ Qur'an 50:39 (*The Clear Quran*).

³⁰ Ibn 'Aqīlah al-Makkī, *al-Ziyādah wal-iḥsān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Sharjah: Markaz al-Buhūth wal-Dirāsāt, 2006), 6:368–75. 6:371.

³¹ Ibn 'Abdīn, *al-Taqrīr*, 31.

³² Qur'an 28:25 (*The Clear Quran*).

³³ Grammarians have identified that the syntactical structure of this sentence allows for the adverb *bashfully* to be in reference to the act of coming, walking, or speaking. The latter was selected above simply to demonstrate the phenomenon of complementary multilayered meanings in the Qur'an. See: 'Abdullaṭīf al-Khaṭīb et al., *al-Taḥqīq fī i'rāb al-tanzīl* (Kuwait: Maktabat al-Khaṭīb, 2015), 20:100–101.

profound linguistic feature that pervades the entire Qur'an, within its stories and elsewhere. This is yet another feature lost on hasty critics of the Qur'an. Where they see the multiple implications of certain verses as a lack of precision, Qur'anic scholars recognize them as a deliberate enrichment of the scriptural narrative, and often mention how the pausal modes (*waqf* and *ibtidā'*) are among the critical tools necessary for a deeper understanding of the Qur'an's stories in particular.³⁴

Another type of dual meaning is found in the closing remarks of *Sūrah Yūsuf* wherein Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) says, “This is news from the past that We reveal to you [O Muhammad]. You were not present with them when they plotted and agreed on a plan.”³⁵ The obvious meaning here is that Allah has just privileged Prophet Muhammad ﷺ with access to lost knowledge as a testament to the truth of his prophethood, which even included the details of the secret plotting done by the mischievous characters of that story. However, the event that prompted the revelation of this *sūrah* suggests that this verse also serves as a threat to those who were currently plotting against the Prophet ﷺ.

To explain, the Jews (a people of Scripture) were consulted by the pagan Arabs on the best way to stump Muhammad ﷺ. Their advice was to question him about Joseph the Israelite, at which point *Sūrah Yūsuf* was revealed, staggering the counselors and their clients with its uncanny truth. However, the *sūrah* does not end with the ending of the story. Allah knew that after failing with their polemics, the opponents of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ would shift from brains to brawn, and soon convene to plot their physical aggressions. *Sūrah Yūsuf* implicitly invokes this context. Just before folding away Joseph's (as) blessed story, the tape is rewound and pulled back into the limelight are Joseph's brothers—how they plotted, deliberated, and executed, and how Allah caused their “well-calculated” plan to fail. It is as if Allah is challenging the belligerent pagans, “Go ahead, make your next move; dare to plot against your own flesh and blood, Muhammad, and your other brothers from Quraysh—just as the brothers of Joseph once did. Go ahead and convene your private meeting about forcing the Muslims into

³⁴ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1:231.

Note: There is a necessary interplay between the disciplines of *waqf* and *ibtidā'*, *naḥw* (Arabic grammar), *tafsīr*, *qirā'āt*, and *fiqh*, for determining where one clause can end and where another may begin.

³⁵ Qur'an 12:102 (*The Clear Quran*, brackets added).

exile—just as the brothers of Joseph once exiled him. We will always be one step ahead of you.” Without warning, the idolators of Mecca ran into a wall of realizations: Allah does not only possess full knowledge of the unseen past, but also the most discreet whispers in the present (which some Arabs doubted).³⁶ Even more, they realized that they were not the only ones plotting, but that Allah was also plotting against them. The story of Joseph and its buried history from centuries ago, to which these pagans had been oblivious, suddenly carried a world of daunting relevance for them. In a divinely orchestrated plot twist, the story they traveled so far to learn and weaponize against Muhammad ﷺ was suddenly their story, directly pointed at them, without the guarantee of a happy ending.

3. Realism

The Qur'an's unwavering commitment to truth infuses its storytelling with a distinctive realism—both in its detailed historical accuracy and uncompromising (but not despairing) depiction of this world's imperfections. Together, these stories neither assert any falsities to be discredited in the future, nor perpetuate fairy tales that would misguide people's expectations of the present. Either of these hypotheticals would be unbecoming of an omniscient, compassionate God who loves to guide His creatures from the darkneses and into the Light.

As for truths from the lost past, the Qur'an brought surgically accurate accounts of history that only the most well-versed scholars in earlier scriptures knew, and were sure that Muhammad ﷺ could not have known unless he was in fact a true messenger of God. Furthermore, the Qur'an excludes some of the historical details found in the Bible (such as [pharaohs existing](#) in the era of Abraham or Joseph)³⁷ that would be later disproven. In addition to proving his prophethood ﷺ, these demonstrably true stories also elevated the recipients of this Qur'an in Arabia from an unlettered Scripture-less people to those who now carry—like their Judeo-Christian counterparts—the mantle of sacred knowledge and Divine

³⁶ *Tafsīr* books document some debates between Quraysh and Thaḳīf on whether or not God can hear whispers, as opposed to public speech, under the verse: “...but you assumed that Allah does not know much of what you do.” Qur'an 41:22.

³⁷ Elshinawy, *The Final Prophet*, 193–95.

insights.³⁸ Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) said, “This is one of the stories of the unseen, which we reveal to you [O Prophet]. Neither you nor your people knew it before this.”³⁹ As for true accounts of the future, this can be evidenced—for instance—through the story of how the [Byzantines would soon rebound](#) after facing extinction at the hands of the Persian Empire,⁴⁰ and the story about how the mummified [corpse of Pharaoh would be preserved](#) and rediscovered.⁴¹

This historical rigor, aside from affirming the Qur'an's miraculous origin, serves a greater moral purpose. By only citing true stories, the Qur'an grounds us in a concrete sense of reality that we often distort through our frequent consumption of fictitious stories. People underestimate just how deeply influenced they are by today's massive fantasy genre of books, films, video games, and advertisements. Regular exposure to these stories will inevitably manipulate a person's emotions and sensibilities well beyond the page (or screen). Just as they say, “the truth will set you free,” the pristine truth of Qur'anic accounts liberates us from any wild or unrealistic expectations of life and the world.

Even the proportionality of certain archetypal figures arising in the Qur'an helps reinforce a realistic worldview. Ibn 'Aqīlah astutely identifies an intriguing anomaly in the stories of the Qur'an; namely that some accounts, like those of Prophet Joseph (as), Dhu'l-Qarnayn, and the sleepers of the cave in *Sūrah al-Kahf*, are only mentioned once, period. In that non-repetition, he argues, is a profound wisdom—an indirect reminder to believers that happy endings in this world are the exception and not the norm. The “success archetypes” who prevail against their enemies in this world, and become living legends due to their piety here on earth, are as rare in Allah's Book as they are in human history. This crystallizes people's expectations of this world as the trial and the next as the verdict, where people will receive what they deserve.⁴² Does this Qur'anic realism not remedy the theodicy question—“Why does God allow pain and suffering?”—which is the [primary contention](#) cited by Western atheists for their non-belief? Does it not dismantle the

³⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:65.

³⁹ Qur'an 11:49 (*The Clear Quran*).

⁴⁰ Elshinawy, *The Final Prophet*, 119–20.

⁴¹ Elshinawy, *The Final Prophet*, 191–92.

⁴² Ibn 'Aqīlah, *al-Ziyādah wal-iḥsān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 6:375.

crude “prosperity theology” that correlates God’s love for people with His lavishing them with fortunes in this life, whereby God is misperceived as a banker and our righteousness as an immediately cashable currency? Does it not rescue people from the utopian mindset curated at the hands of Disney and its ilk, frustrating people for a lifetime due to the “happily ever after” idealism they espouse but can never provide? After all, true and lasting happiness is not a byproduct of materialism (a widespread fraud in today’s global culture) but of meaning and purpose, which is what Islam offers for contentment in this life and eternal happiness in the life to come.

Similarly, Qur’anic stories mention doomed individuals and nations more often than not because human beings doom themselves more often than not. The elites of most nations will insist on self-destruction for themselves and their followers, and therefore it should be expected that accounts of Iblīs (Satan), or the people of Noah (as) or Lot (as) and their like, are repeated as regularly as they are. And of course, since no other prophet compares with Moses (as) in his likeness to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and no other nation compares with the Israelites in its likeness to the *umma* of Muhammad ﷺ, “the Qur’an in its entirety was almost going to be solely the story of Moses (as).”⁴³ In summation, the Qur’an provides a perfectly balanced set of affirmations for patterns in life through its stories.

4. Visualizing Divine Wisdom

Since on some level “seeing is believing,”⁴⁴ and “a picture is worth a thousand words,” the Qur’an’s stories visualize its themes and expand on them. Most of us, for instance, know in our heart of hearts that God is good, but without “seeing” that unfold in detail from a reliable source, that understanding can get smothered and consequently not nourish our spirits much at all. The Qur’an therefore uses stories to “detail” this notion that Allah wishes for us to recall. We’ve all witnessed how actors in the worlds of marketing, business, fundraising, education, and beyond leverage the distinct emotional and imaginative power of images and short story animations to generate demand for their products. The Qur’an, by virtue of its

⁴³ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 1:157.

⁴⁴ The Prophet ﷺ said, “News is not equivalent to eyewitnessing.” Narrated by Ahmad (no. 2447) and Ibn Hibban (no. 6231) and deemed authentic by al-Albani in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’* (no. 5374).

storytelling prowess, employs a similar technique. The following are examples of how the depictions we find in Qur'anic storytelling afford us potent, detailed visuals of its general principles.

1. **Visualizing the power of God.** Instead of stopping at declarative statements about God being the Almighty and invincible, the Qur'an presents story after story on how the believers triumphed despite their many disadvantages. Instead of merely promising a good outcome for the faithful even if cornered by a bleak reality, Allah "shows" us Jonah (as) in the belly of the whale as "he called out [from] within the darknesses, 'There is no deity except You; exalted are You. Indeed, I have been of the wrongdoers.' So We responded to him and saved him from the distress. And thus do We save the believers."⁴⁵
2. **Visualizing God's master plan.** Once, when the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions had neared Mecca for their 'umrah after a long and grueling journey, a camel belonging to the Prophet ﷺ named al-Qaṣwā' sat down and adamantly refused to advance. People chastised the camel for its apparent stubbornness, to which the Prophet ﷺ responded, "No, al-Qaṣwā' is not being stubborn, nor is that one of its qualities. Rather, it is being restrained by the One who restrained the [army of] elephants."⁴⁶ Bask in the radiance of this Qur'anic personality; how clear its visuals were in his blessed mind and how present its wisdoms were in his blessed heart. Immediately, he ﷺ was able to glean from the concise *Sūrah al-Fīl* (Chapter of the Elephant) a lesson for this scenario that beckoned him to surrender to Divine intervention, and that guides us to realize that the immovable boulders (elephants) we all have in our lives should not overstress us.
3. **Visualizing human history.** Just as mainstream educational systems provide accounts of world history from a very particular frame of reference, be it political or economic or otherwise, the Qur'an also teaches history in a very systematic way: from the prophetic perspective. Its methodology is one that

⁴⁵ Qur'an 21:87–88 (*Saheeh International* translation, brackets added).

⁴⁶ *Saḥīḥi Bukhārī*, nos. 2731 and 2732.

openly calls the reader to understand world history as, most importantly, the grand story of *tawhīd* (God's Oneness) and how that pertains to the human condition. It emphasizes that this—embracing or rejecting *tawhīd*—is the single most consequential quality of every civilization and every individual, and the ultimate determinant for the outcome of each nation. As Allah says, “So these are their houses in utter ruin, for they did wrong. Indeed, in that is a great sign for people who know.”⁴⁷ In other words, never assume it was the natural disaster or strife or non-productivity that brought about their demise; it was their wrongdoing.

4. **Visualizing the world stage.** The prevalence of illiteracy in Arabia had resulted in (along with paganism) uncreative materialists who struggled to appreciate abstract knowledge. Their minds were to a great extent tethered to their immediate environment, and hence the majority of their poetry revolved around concrete objects such as the tent, the sword, the bucket, and the goat. But since these trailblazers (the first Muslims of this *ummah*) would soon engage others on a global level, carrying Islam to them far and wide, they needed to broaden their horizons. Stories in the Qur'an played a major role in stirring interest in the outside world, and humility when confronting the strengths of these great civilizations. It also helped immunize Muslims against some of the delusion and conceit that inevitably creep up on every superpower, and neutralize the paralyzing fear of other nations that kept them subservient to their regimes.⁴⁸ There remains, of course, renewed relevance to “think big” even for those at the pinnacle of the modern world—to live for a greater purpose than convenience, and to see oneself as above being a captive of personal luxury and consumption.
5. **Visualizing human nature.** As social creatures who desire to like and be liked, and incomplete creatures who are interdependent in many respects, we often unconsciously choose to imagine people as having greater regard for us than they actually do. This paves the way for feelings of disappointment and betrayal each time we rediscover that “people are people” in their selfish motives and unpredictable temperaments. Even the Prophet ﷺ

⁴⁷ Qur'an 27:52 (author's translation).

⁴⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:67.

experienced this, but “seeing” similar occurrences through the Qur’anic stories suppressed his anger. In one of many examples, after the Battle of Hunayn, when a hypocrite accused him ﷺ of inequitable distribution of the spoils, he ﷺ consoled himself by saying, “Allah have mercy on my brother, Moses. He was abused more than this, and yet he was still patient.”⁴⁹ In this vein, Allah says, “And each [story] We relate to you from the news of the messengers is that by which We make firm your heart.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

The various stories in the Qur'an, as uniquely told by the Qur'an, offer us invaluable reminders and timeless lessons on universal themes that pertain to every dimension of the human experience. Through them, faith in Allah's beautiful names and lofty attributes is found and not just defined, illness is endured when it cannot yet be cured, the oppressed remain optimistic until relief comes, and so much more. While those who settle for a cursory glance at the Qur'an may not realize the distinct wisdom in how its stories are mapped out, those who believe in this Mighty Book and dedicate themselves to rehearsing its stories will find layers upon layers of enlightenment, healing, and guidance therein. As partially captured in this brief paper, the truths of these stories, their respective locations and lengths in the Qur'an, and how Allah chooses to articulate them each time, all contribute to the unique lessons to be derived from them, and drive us to our betterment in this world and salvation in the next.

⁴⁹ *Saḥīḥī Bukhārī*, nos. 3405 and 6336.

⁵⁰ Qur'an 11:120 (*Saheeh International*).