

**In the Presence of the Sublime Qur'an:  
A Commentary on Part 30 [chapters 78-114]**

*Abdolali Bazargan (trans. Mohammad Fani and Amir Douraghy;  
ed. Hamid Mavani)*

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This volume represents an especially modern viewpoint with regard to understanding the Qur'an and its message, while also being firmly embedded in traditional approaches and methods for its interpretation. The commentary consists of a number of lectures originally given in Persian by Abdolali Bazargan as a weekly lecture series in Irvine, CA. These lectures, a portion of which have been translated and edited into this single volume, were initially presented to groups of lay Muslims interested in the general theme of "becoming acquainted with the Qur'an" (p. xiv).

The author, Abdolali Bazargan, is part of the laity himself: an architect by profession. While not having been fully trained in the traditional sciences

of Qur'anic interpretation, his strong interest in Qur'anic exegesis (according to the editor) has led him to spend "the last 55 years researching it and writing 20 books in the field of Qur'anic sciences" (p. xiv). This volume is thus a lay commentary on the Qur'an's "short surahs," namely *al-Fātiḥah* and the last *juz'* (chapters 78-114). Although no specific argument or thesis holds the entirety of the work together, it nevertheless stands as a representative sample of modern (educated) Muslim engagement with the text of the Qur'an and its ramifications for their lived religious tradition, particularly in the modern world.

Bazargan and his team take this engagement seriously, for this commentary (as well as, apparently, the lectures of which it is a transcript) is intended to be essentially devotional, evangelistic, and apologetic in nature. Both of the translators and the editor highlight such a goal in their prefaces. One translator points out that the main purpose is "to bring the Holy Qur'an's message to those speakers of English who may not be familiar with Farsi, Arabic, or Islamic history" (p. x). The other (in speaking of issues related to having two translators) advises: "Let us dwell less on the differences and study the message of the Qur'an for our guidance and believe in it as a divine glory to uphold. These lectures are not meant to sit on a shelf" (p. xi). Editor Hamid Mavani notes that the volume, in part, is intended for Muslims who may feel bewildered or unsure about how to engage the text of the Qur'an:

[Bazargan's] approach makes the Qur'anic text accessible, relevant, interactive, and dialogical for Muslims who have lost their connection with this living text. This fresh and innovative commentary is meant for the general public, for his style is straightforward and avoids polemics and doctrinal nit-picking. After all, the Qur'an was meant for humanity at large, as opposed to a privileged class of religious experts and jurists. (p. xiv)

This quote represents a starting point for engagement with both this work's strengths and weaknesses, especially as many of its characteristics can be seen either way, depending upon the reader's perspective. The intentional highlighting of the dichotomy between traditionally trained experts in the text and laity stands as such an issue. To a certain audience, such an approach may be regarded as positive, as it represents a specific discursive orientation toward the West and modernity, an acceptance of a historical narrative that something happened to propel western civilization to unforeseen advancement while the Muslim world stagnated, and that this situation can be fixed by a reorientation to modernity. Bazargan brings such a narrative to the fore both historically and religiously (see pp. 311-12, 316, *passim*). But to other audiences, such an ori-

entation could easily be seen as a betrayal of those aspects that have historically formed the center of their religious world. Bazargan quite clearly wears his discourse on his own sleeve, proudly displaying how and what he stands for. It is up to the reader or audience to decide if this is a positive feature or not.

Such an orientation, however, should not be characterized as a simplistically modern narrative or discourse, but rather as a complex balancing act. Bazargan draws distinctly from both modernist and traditional forms and norms of engagement with the Qur'an. In form, his approach follows traditional norms in being essentially atomistic, meaning that he largely focuses on one verse at a time while progressing through the chapter under discussion. Likewise, as he is very much concerned with interpreting the Qur'an by means of the Qur'an, he utilizes many other pertinent Qur'anic verses to understand the specific verse being analyzed.

But while traditional in form, his approach to the text is more eclectic, for it takes from many modern notions and perspectives rather than just from the traditional Qur'anic sciences. One of these approaches is a scientific exegesis – seeing in the Qur'an information or specific knowledge of a modern scientific nature, whether astronomical, medical, or otherwise. Another one can be described as contextualist, in that he views and interprets the Qur'an (or at least certain portions of it) as contextually bound in seventh-century Arabia and thus needing to be understood from a historical-critical perspective. And yet this approach is not uniform throughout the commentary, for Bazargan utilizes it mainly when it helps him make a devotional or apologetic argument, while at other times he either provides no historical context or ignores historical considerations in favor of more devotional or allegorical interpretations. This devotional purpose or aim is bolstered by these allegorical readings and interpretations, even though in some cases it actively militates against traditional practices and considerations (e.g., interpreting the Qur'an as being against common contemporary Muslim commemorative practices [pp. 392-94]).

The devotional purpose and the perspectives against certain traditional practices are further complicated by the fact that Bazargan, being Iranian, is coming from a Shi'ite viewpoint. This is readily apparent, as he frequently leans upon interpretive notions from Ali or contained in the *Nahj al-Balāghah*. Likewise, there are frequent references to Husayn, Karbala, Muharram, and other elements commonly held to be mostly Shi'ite in orientation. But this simply remains an artifact of Bazargan's worldview and interpretive framework, as it does not edge into any sectarian claims or polemics. The closest he comes to polemics is in his political interpretations, which, given his self-

imposed exile from Iran (p. xiv), are hard to read in any way other than as thinly veiled criticisms of a certain theo-political regime (e.g., pp. 192, 197-98, 200-01, 233, 243, 290, *passim*), although they might apply to other political climates as well.

While the commentary's target audience – educated, somewhat westernized, lay Muslims of the Shi'ite persuasion – will find great devotional and apologetic value in this volume, from a scholarly perspective (either that of traditional trained ulema or of critical western academic approaches), the work itself presents more of a mixed bag. This volume (and any potential further commentaries produced from the original lectures) is of considerable value to the scholarly community in its nature as a representation of modern, moderate, lay positions and understandings of the Qur'an, based in and bearing the hallmark of the reform movements of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Likewise, it is a valuable addition to the corpus of modern reception history of the Qur'an, particularly in its melding of a modern worldview with traditional methods and sources.

However, western scholars (disclosure: this is the position from which I am approaching this volume) may be put off by an apologetic approach that is very methodologically eclectic and muddled, as it seems to be attempting to do too much – and not doing much of it exceedingly well. While it is certainly a positive goal (from one perspective) to avoid the pitfalls of doctrinal, linguistic, or historical “nitpicking,” doing so leads to an amateur aesthetic beset by suspect etymologies or word definitions (e.g., rejecting the definition of *‘ibādah* as “worship” in favor of “filling in holes” or “making smooth” [p. 409], or claiming that *tayr* in *Sūrat al-Fīl* refers to lava ejected by a volcanic eruption [p. 379]), false historical claims (e.g., that the Israelites built the pyramids as Pharaoh's slaves [p. 199]), and importing extreme readings into the text (e.g., interpreting three usages of *al-ladhī* in one chapter to denote monotheism, prophethood, and resurrection, respectively [p. 171]).

And yet scholars could easily look past these issues in order to utilize this volume as an important example of continued lay engagement with the Qur'an in the modern era, an attempt to interpret it with modern and moderate eyes. On certain counts it accomplishes this well, from advocating positive engagement and viewpoints with regard to other religious traditions (pp. 83, 111, *passim*) to rejecting compulsion in religious and political matters even within Muslim-majority societies (pp. 84-85, *passim*).

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