

## CHRONICLES OF THE QUR'ĀN

### QAṢAṢ AL-QUR'ĀN

This article comprises the following sections: i. Definitions and Usage; ii. Key Features; iii. Purposes; iv. Divine Custom, Wisdom, Might, and Mercy; v. Benefits; vi. The Best of Chronicles; vii. Exegetical Reflections on Sūrat al-Qaṣṣa; viii. Bibliography.

#### Definitions and Usage

The term *qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* (“Chronicles of the Qur’ān”) refers here to the Qur’ānic narrations of persons, places, and events from the past. The noun *qaṣaṣ* (sing. *qiṣṣa*) is derived from the root *q-ṣ-ṣ*, which bears the meanings of “to follow, as one does another’s tracks (*athar*), or news and events, one after another” (Azharī; Rāghib; Fayrūzābādī, Baṣā’ir). “A long narration is called a chronicle because its parts follow each other” (‘Askarī, Furūq, al-Bāb al-thānī fi-l-farq bayna mā kāna min hādihā-l-naw‘ kalāman, al-farq bayna-l-qaṣaṣ wal-ḥadīth).

A storyteller (*qāṣṣ, qaṣṣāṣ*) is the one who relates a story, word followed by word (*Zabīdī, Tāj*), “to soften the hearts of people” (Zamakhsharī, *Asās*), but it is improper to call Allah Most High a storyteller (*qāṣṣ*), as one would a professional raconteur (*Furūq*). “[Qur’ānic] chronicles are a collection of speech (*majmū‘ al-kalām*) comprising all that leads to religion, guides to Truth, and commands seeking salvation” (Rāzī, *sub Q 3:62-63*).

The root appears 30 times in three derived forms: 20 times as Form I verb (*qaṣṣa*) in 18 verses (Q 4:164x2; 6:57, 130; 7:7, 35, 101, 176; 11:100, 120; 12:3, 5; 16:118; 18:13; 20:99; 27:76; 28:11, 25; 40:78x2); four times as the noun *qiṣāṣ* (“retaliatory punishment”; Q 2:178, 179; 2:194; 5:45); and six times as *qaṣaṣ* (“Chronicles”; Q 3:62; 7:176; 12:3, 111; 18:64; 28:25). In addition, Q 28 is called Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ (see below).

The Qur’ān also uses derivatives of the root *n-b-‘* to introduce its chronicles. The noun *naba’*, used twenty-nine times, refers to news, tidings, information, announcement, an account, a narrative, a story, and what is related from one to another” (Jawharī; Fayyūmī; Fayrūzābādī); it is a synonym of “*khabar*” (“news”) (Azharī; Ibn Fāris), as in Q 3:44 *this is the news* (*anbā’*) *from the unseen that we reveal to you* and Q 7:101, *those cities—We relate to you some of their news* (*anbā’*). Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad al-Rāghib (d. ca.502/1108) says *nabā’* signifies beneficial news (*khabr mafīd*), leading to positive knowledge

or preponderant conjuncture; one cannot use *nabā’* for a news until it meets three conditions: it must be (i) undoubtedly true and absolutely free of falsehood, like news through an unbroken chain, news from Allah Most High, and from the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace; (ii) be of great importance; and (iii) provide knowledge (*Mufradāt*).

#### Key Features

##### Concision

The Qur’ānic chronicles often omit details that would index a particular location or time. Instead they provide only those details which are necessary for conveying its message. For instance, the chronicle of Prophet Ādam, upon him peace (*q.v.*), relates that he and his spouse were placed in Paradise (*q.v.*) where they could go anywhere, but were commanded ‘*approach not this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers*’ (Q 2:35)—without describing the tree itself, because it was “the prohibition that was the trial (*mihnat*) for them—because the world itself is an abode of trials. [Ādam] was created from the [substance of the] earth, to face trials on its surface; he and his offspring were tried by the permitted and the prohibited” (Samarqandī). The Qur’ānic concision often gathers manifold meanings in few words. Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘ (595–654/1198-1256), the author *Badā’i‘ al-Qur’ān*, said, “In all the works of prose and poetry, I have neither seen nor narrated anything like the verse from the Book of Most High, *And it was said: O earth, swallow your water, and O sky, withhold—and the water subsided, the matter accomplished*; it contains, in its seventeen words, twenty rhetoric wonders.” (p. 340). Commenting on the same verse (Q 11:44)—which appears in the Chronicle of Nūḥ, upon him peace—Jār Allāh Abū-I-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ‘Amr b. Aḥmad al-Zamakhsharī (467-538/ca.1074-1143) says the vocative particle (*yā*), normally used for creatures possessing discernment and intellect (*ahl al-tamyīz wal-‘aql*), is used in this verse for two inanimate objects—earth and sky—with a command, “*Swallow your water and withhold*”, proving [His] Great Might, indicative of the fact that these enormous created bodies are submissive to His Volition to configure them [as He desires], unable to restrain Him [from commanding them], and [when commanded] they behave like possessors of intellect and discernment (*‘uqalā’ mamizūn*), who know and recognize His Exaltedness (*‘azamatuhu*) and His Majesty (*jalālatuhu*), His reward and His punishment and His Power over all things...” (*Kashshāf*). Abū-I-Faḍl Shihāb al-Dīn al-Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (1217-1270/1803-1853)