

CONTEMPLATION TAFAKKUR, TADABBUR

This article comprises the following sections: i. Definitions and Usage; ii. The Nature, Scope, and Focus of Qurʾānic Contemplation; iii. *Tadabbur*: Pondering the Qurʾān; iv. *Tafakkur*: Contemplating the Signs; v. Select Exegetical Reflections; vi. Select Literature; viii. Bibliography.

Definitions and Usage

The most conspicuous Qurʾānic terms for contemplation are the Form V augmented trilaterals from the root stems *d-b-r* (*tadabbur*) and *f-k-r* (*tafakkur*), the main significance of this verbal form being “the attainment of one’s objective, step by step” (al-Danqarī, *Bināʾ al-afʿāl*, p. 72). In all four instances of the use of the former, the object of contemplation is the Qurʾān itself (e.g., Q 4:82; 47:24: *do they not ponder the Qurʾān?*), whereas in the seventeen occurrences of the latter, it is some particular law, parable, aphorism, or aspect of creation (e.g., Q 30:8: *have they not reflected on their own selves?*).

The original meaning of the root *d-b-r* is to “follow someone” or “be the end of something.” The primary meaning of the Form II verbal noun *tadbīr*, usually rendered “organization” or “direction,” is “to forecast the end or result of an event or thing” (Zabīdī), because *dubur* (pl. *adbār*) literally means the “back part” or “end” of something (Ibn Manẓūr), as in Q 8:15 (*turn not your backs* (al-*adbār*) and Q 17:46 (*they turn their backs* (al-*adbār*)). The form IV verb *adbara* means “to turn one’s back” (e.g., on faith, as in Q 74:23). Moreover, Allah Most High directs His creation (*yudabbiru al-amr*; Q 32:5) towards a particular end, which He already knows in full. In accordance with this basic semantic purview, the practice of “pondering” (*tadabbur*) is exactly “inquiry into the outcomes or ‘ends’ of things” (*al-tadabbur ʿibāra ʿan al-nazar fī ʿawāqib al-umūr wa adbārihā*) (Rāzī, *sub* Q 4:82), and, by implication, the true natures of both created phenomena and events or states of affairs. However, it has come to denote any type of contemplation (*taʾammul*) (Nasafī, *sub* Q 4:82)—it thus implies *tafakkur* but is not limited to the particularity of the latter’s definition (see below). The verse *have they not pondered (yaddabārū) the Word?* (Q 23:68) is an example of an assimilated form V verb, the letter *tāʾ* having been incorporated (*udghimat*) into the *dāl* (Jalālayn), as also in Q 38:29.

Ibn Manẓūr (630-711/1233-ca.1312) writes that *fikr* (“thought”) means “the mind’s being put into

operation regarding something,” whereas he transmits from Ismāʿil al-Jawharī (d. 393/ca.1002) author of the pivotal lexicon *al-Sihāh*, that *tafakkur*—the form used in the Qurʾān—means the more specific “contemplation” (*taʾammul*). However, the majority of authorities hold that *fikr* and *tafakkur* are synonymous (e.g., Zabīdī), and indeed, Ibn Manẓūr opines that *fakara*, *fakkara*, and *tafakkara* (verbal Forms I, II, and V) all have the same meaning. Al-Samīn al-Ḥalabī (d. 756/1355) relates that certain litterateurs hold that *fikr* (thought) is an inversion of *farḥ* (rubbing something such that its protective layer comes off), for the latter meaning is also applicable in the intelligible realm (*fī-l-maʿānī*) in the sense of seeking after the real natures of things—the “protective layer” divested here presumably referring to subjective elements discarded by virtue of the “friction” of thought. He explains *fikr* as “a speculative faculty by which [the potential human capacity for] knowledge arrives at an object of knowledge” whereas contemplation (*tafakkur*) is “the free movement of that faculty in accordance with the speculative [principles] of the intellect” (*ʿUmdat al-ḥuffāz*, *sub* *f-k-r*).

The Nature, Scope, and Focus of Qurʾānic Contemplation

Contemplation is a fundamental spiritual and intellectual activity prescribed by the Qurʾān; is a prerequisite to understanding the profundities of the text itself, and a means for the interpretation of aspects of the “signs” (*q.v.*) (*āyāt*) in the manifest world. Diverse cues for contemplation occur throughout the Qurʾān, some appearing only once (e.g., Q 30:8: *have they not contemplated their own selves?*) and others in a number of instances, most prominently those explicitly linked to the interpretation of the signs (e.g., Q 13:3; 16:11; 69; 30:21; 39:42; 45:13: *surely in that are signs for a people who contemplate*). These signs can be categorized into multiple loci, which constitute general frameworks of concepts within which contemplation should take place; they are ultimately interrelated manifestations and exemplars of the fundamental themes of the Qurʾān itself, which Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (450-505/1058-1111) had insightfully identified to be Unicity of God, Prophethood, and the Return, that is Resurrection (*Tawhīd*, *risāla*, and *maʿād* (*Jawāhir*, p. 23)

The effects (*āthār*) of Allah, manifesting in His creation, contain signs and indications of spiritual realities that may be concurrently signified or implied in a single verse. Such is the case in Q 30:50 (*look at*