



Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Styles

Muhammad A.S. Abdel Haleem (Translator)

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The tenets of Islam cannot be grasped without a proper understanding of the Qur'an. In this book, Muhammad Abdel Haleem examines its recurrent themes and for the first time sets them in the context of the Qur'an's linguistic style. Haleem examines the background to the development of the surahs (chapters) and the ayahs (verses) and the construction of the Qur'an itself.

Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Styles Details

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Author : Muhammad A.S. Abdel Haleem (Translator)

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From Reader Review Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Styles for online ebook

Samer says

This book pinpoints a couple of interesting themes and styles in the Quran. Throughout the book, comparisons are made to the Bible in some relatively interesting ways.

There is a heavy focus on Arabic grammar throughout the Quran and it's importance. The author also compares his own translation of the Quran to many others and breaks down some of the inaccuracies in popular translations that exist today.

Overall, I enjoyed the book. It was a little dry at times, but it's not exactly easy to keep perfect attention with an in depth discussion on Arabic grammar and exegeses. The main themes of water, life after death, war and peace, etc are well written and worth a look in my opinion.

Husna says

A good introductory work overall, but I wouldn't recommend it for someone looking for a more complex treatment of the subject. While the selection of themes is interesting, the writing gets overtly and unnecessarily apologetic at times. A broad sweep of the surface rather than an impressive and profound analysis.

Um Taqwa says

I absolutely loved this book, I hope to write a full review soon. I gift this to non-Muslims friends with a copy of Muhammed Abdel Haleem's Quran translation. If you're interested in the Quran, read this book.

Elizabeth says

read following suras only: 1, 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 20, 23, 24, 25, 27, 35, 36, 50, 51, 57, 76, 79, 85, 92, 96, 112

Charity says

This book, as the subtitle suggests, divides commentary on the Qur'an into different themes. For my class, I closely read the chapters on the judgment and the afterlife on the one on marriage and divorce, and I very much appreciated the way Haleem groups together passages from the Qur'an and related hadith within these categories. It very much aided my understanding. I anticipate turning to this book when I have questions about a particular theme as I explore the Qur'an on my own now that my class is over. I'm especially intrigued by the chapter "The Face, Divine and Human, in the Qur'an."

Nathaniel says

A very well-written overlook on the Qur'an as it is to be understood. Haleem does a good job of not just stressing but showing the uniqueness and character of the Qur'an and showing its textual relation with the Holy Bible. Excellent Islam 101 material; highly recommendable.

Yousef M says

Got through a third of the book, skimmed through the rest based on what I had read so far. Muhammad Abdel Haleem is a Professor at the prestigious SOAS so I figured this would be a good book to pick up during Ramadan to delve into the underlying message of the Qur'an (which I honestly find difficult reading as if it's any other English-language chapter book). I've always enjoyed books about Islam's spiritual message as my personal belief is the breadth of the faith cannot simply be confined to a book, at least not what appears superficially in the Qur'an.

Needless to say, I was a bit disappointed in Abdel Haleem's apologist approach to criticisms of the Qur'an and the always annoying digression of Islam into a lesson on Arabic grammar and syntax. For a professor at SOAS, this book comes off as extremely non-academic and poorly cited. If, as an historian, you're conclusively asserting that the Qur'an is clearly the same as it was for Muhammad, supporting this only using the fact that companions of the Prophet "surely" wouldn't have altered the order of the chapters of the Qur'an because of their self-proclaimed reverence isn't very convincing, particularly when you simultaneously acknowledge that variants had already arisen. I understand that is a belief Muslims are supposed to hold, but it is better to just state that than try to pass it off as historical fact with no supporting citations. Likewise, his other refutations of Orientalist accusations about the Qur'an's origins and organization lack citations and place unnecessary emphasis on the vastness of one Arabic word that prior generations may have missed. This can be a bit tiresome and detracts from positive messages he could be devoting much more time to. Instead, Abdel Haleem comes across more of an apologist than a scholar and seems suited for the Muslim looking for interfaith debate tactics than a general audience wanting to gain spiritual insight. His defensive tone re: certain Christian beliefs/rites (e.g. the Lord's Prayer, contrasting marital misogyny) in "defending" Islam is also unnecessary.

To be fair, Abdel Haleem does have interesting insights on the place of water, marriage/divorce, and other topics, but I was looking for something a little more profound (a la Tariq Ramadan's books). Perhaps I am not the audience intended for this book, but I cannot imagine newbies to this area of study being particularly fascinated by pages of Arabic lexicography and syntax discussions.

If you are a Muslim feeling particularly defensive about his/her faith based on someone's statements about the Qur'an and want to educate yourself a little, then I would recommend reading this book, at least certain portions of it. If you are an Islamic/Arabic Language studies major with an interest in Qur'an translations, then I would highly recommend this book. If you want a more historical and deeper insight into Islamic spirituality and what lessons the Qur'an provides, you'll find some nice insights primarily at the beginning of each of the chapters, but I'd look somewhere else.

Rikkert Kuijper says

I'm not a fan. I was expecting a critical analysis, but it's mostly a perfect personal interpretation, that makes the Qur'an and Islam the perfect basis for everything ever, where everything is perfect in every imaginable way. In a way that is what Muslims might believe, so in that light it was insightful, but it wasn't what I hoped for when looking at the book.

There are no difficulties in anything, no contradicting verses get mentioned (the "everyone gets dark eyed virgins" part of paradise are now all spouses made virgin again, for whatever reason, "nobody gets mentioned by name or personally isn't being discussed in the light of Sura 111: 'May the hands of Abu Laheb be ruined! May he be ruined too! Neither his wealth nor his gains will help him: he will burn in the Flaming Fire -- and so will his wife, the firewood carrier, with a palm-fibre rope around her neck.'), no orthodox scholars get mentioned, no inter-Islamic ideologies get mentioned, no actual state policies or circumstances get mentioned. Islam is perfectly compatible with everything modern, even though there are tons of people out there violently protesting against it, women are perfectly equal, etc. It's beyond apologetic, it's a utopia with no basis in reality. It's the same old story of "only defensive wars" (during the life of the Prophet, perhaps) without explaining how Muslims "defended" themselves all the way into Al-Andalus, even under the "rightly guided caliphs". I don't even condemn it, I just want to understand the justifications and how the religion is seen to be compatible with it. I understand this isn't a history book, but you can't "understand" anything if you don't allow at least a small insight into the reality of the religion and its manifestations.

I've read Haleem's translation of the Qur'an, and that also plays a massive part in this work. A vast section of every chapter is used for semantic debate and translation errors of previous translators, which are really only insightful if you've read these other translations.

All in all, I'm perfectly aware of the fact that Mr. Haleem is far more qualified on every word in the Qur'an than I am, and that his opinion on it carries infinitely more weight, but it's just that when I read "Understanding the Qur'an" I didn't expect this much "How I understand the Qur'an". I suppose I'll go read Ibn Taymiyyah myself to see where all these beautifully peaceful messages seem to get so distorted.

Basically, it's a short read, but I still don't think it's worth the time. Read the Qur'an, read the Hadith, talk to Muslims, and most of it should be pretty clear to you.

Sakib says

This is a truly remarkable book. The Qur'an is the supreme authority in Islam, and unfortunately the amount of scholarship on the book in English is very limited. Abdel-Haleem, who is also responsible for a brilliant English translation of the Qur'an (insofar as translations can be brilliant), does an excellent job at explaining various important topics within the Qur'an: water, marriage and divorce, war and peace, the story of Adam and Eve, the story of Joseph, the style of Qur'anic prose, and more. Of course, these are a fraction of the topics within the Qur'an, but one can never encompass all Qur'anic discussions into a single book.

It has been instrumental in helping me to understand more of the Qur'an. Highly recommended.

Ivan says

This book was quite a disappointment and I had to scan through most of it as it was literally... pointless. This was not about "Themes and Style" of the Qu'ran. It was more so his cherry picking on certain topics that he wanted to go on and on and on about, for no reason. He was also very apologist in his writing in regard to any criticism of the Qu'ran as if there is no legitimate concerns on the accuracy of some of the texts. I do prefer his translation of the Qu'ran to some of the more popular versions such as Yusuf Abdullah Ali (The KJV of Qu'ran translations) but he either rushed this book to print and missed a wealth of actually helpful information or he just likes to talk about points that actually have no value. Either way, 2 stars for the information in the book that can actually be of use.

Tisha says

I have had this book sitting on my shelf since 2012 so I am glad to have finally finished reading it. I can't say that I found this book riveting all the way through; I did need to really motivate myself to get through some of the chapters, especially the last two (which I ended up skim-reading). There were a few chapters that I really enjoyed however - chapters 9 (The Face, Divine and Human, in the Qur'an), 11 (The story of Joseph in the Qur'an and the Bible) and 7 (Life and Beyond).

It was good for me to have Ramadan as a reason to motivate myself to read this, although I don't think I'll be picking it up again anytime soon: the delivery of the contents was, at times, incredibly monotonous and dry, and I think some of its topics have been written about far better in previous books that I've read.

Zahrah Awaleh says

Great book on a wide selection of topics. Good intro for anyone interested in the text, themes, rhetoric, etc.

Jamal Abisourour says

An Oxford professor's soft and easy-to-read book on the main themes of the Quran for those that are interested in the message behind the book and that don't have time to read it. A good primer to the Islam's holiest book.

Miranti says

Honestly I kind of enjoyed half parts of the book, especially chapter 4 (Marriage and Divorce) to 8 (Paradise in The Qur'an) and 10 (Adam and Eve). But as it reach towards the end, seems to me that the material gets harder to understand and wasn't on the same level as the previous chapters. For example, in chapter 12 (Ar-Rahman). I was expecting more about insights, was okay with the linguistic background, but for some reason it comes off too technical that I ended up losing the big picture of what the chapter is trying to say. More so in chapter 13. Sorry to say, but the explanation gets really tedious that I find it hard to finish. It's not about the content, more about the delivery. Could have given more stars if it could keep my interest better until the end. Anyway, many lessons can be taken from this book. It clears up many misconceptions, although not gonna answer every question. This book might be easier to understand if you have intermediate knowledge of Arabic Language.

Fardeem Munir says

This book claims to explore the themes and styles in the Quran and delivers through and through. The writer's command of the Arabic language is breathtaking and his ability to synthesize 1400 years of scholarship to a concise summary is even more impressive. There isn't *any* unnecessary jargon in the text and each chapter delivers a powerful aspect of the Quran. This isn't an exegesis by any measure but it is a response to many allegations that are made against the book by orientalist and other scholars. One of the things I truly appreciated while going through the book is how the author never presents an evidence by saying so-and-so said it but actually goes through the logic to explain why in this opinion, this should be taken to be true. A fantastic read for anyone who wants to get a birds-eye view of the themes of the Quran and why most translations are incredibly difficult to read.
