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## Qur'anic Interpretation and the Phenomenon of Ellipsis and Brevity: A Critical Analysis

### Tafsiran al-Quran dan Fenomena Ellipsis dan Breviti: Analisa Kritis

Israr Ahmad Khan\*

#### Abstract

Scholars of Qur'anic Studies like al-Zarkashī (d.794 A.H.) and al-Suyūfī (d.911 A.H.) have dealt in detail with Qur'anic ellipsis and brevity (*hadhf and ījāz*) in their respective works on Qur'anic Studies. Commentators of the Qur'an like al-Ṭabarī (d.310 A.H.), al-Zamakhsharī (d.538 A.H.), and al-Rāzī (d.606 A.H.) have identified the phenomenon of ellipsis and brevity at several places in the Qur'an. Yet, this feature of the Qur'an did not get proper recognition in the methodology of Qur'anic interpretation. The Qur'an came down in the linguistic style of Arabs in general and Quraysh in particular who loved to apply ellipsis and brevity in their poetry and prose. Any poem or oration deplete with this style was not appreciated by Arabs. One of the main reasons for the Arabs' acceptance of the Qur'an as the most effective and highly moving discourse was its brevity (*ījāz*) due to the ellipsis (*hadhf*) of details of the matter concerned. It seems then quite pertinent to interpret the Qur'an by taking into consideration, among others, phenomenon of ellipsis and brevity. One may see four kinds of ellipsis occurred in the Qur'an: (1) the background of revelation, (2) certain words, (3) complete sentence, and (4) whole paragraph. Interpretation of the Qur'an needs to be based on the identification of one kind of ellipsis or another. This exercise may facilitate the serious task of Qur'anic interpretation. This paper will identify and explain the four categories of ellipsis and brevity in the Qur'an.

**Keywords:** Ellipsis, Brevity, the Qur'an, Interpretation, Revelation.

#### Abstrak

Para ulama al-Quran seperti al-Zarkashī (d.794 A.H.) dan al-Suyūfī (d.911 A.H.) dalam kajian mereka telah membincangkan elipsis dan brevity (*hadhf and ījāz*) dalam al-Quran. Para pengulas al-Quran seperti al-Ṭabarī (d.310 A.H.), al-Zamakhsharī (d.538 A.H.), dan al-Rāzī (d.606 A.H.) telah mengenalpasti fenomena elipsis dan brevity di beberapa tempat dalam al-Quran. Namun tidak diberi pengiktirafan dalam metod-

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ologi penafsiran al-Quran. Al-Quran diturunkan dalam gaya linguistik Arab amnya dan Quraysh khususnya dimana mereka mengaplikasikan konsep elipsis dan brevity dalam kebanyakan puisi dan prosa mereka. Sebarang puisi yang tidak mempunyai elipsis dan brevity adalah tidak diminati oleh orang Arab. Salah satu sebab utama orang Arab mempercayai al-Quran sebagai kitab yang paling tinggi adalah kerana brevity (*ijāz*) yang disebabkan elipsis (*hadhf*) butiran perkara berkenaan. Jadi ia nampaknya sangat penting untuk menafsirkan al-Quran dengan fenomena elipsis dan brevity. Ada empat jenis elipsis yang berlaku dalam al-Quran: (1) latar belakang wahyu, (2) perkataan tertentu, (3) ayat sepenuhnya, dan (4) perenggan. Penafsiran al-Quran perlu berasaskan pengenalan elipsis. Latihan ini boleh memudahkan kerja penafsiran yang serius terhadap al-Quran. Kajian ini akan mengenalpasti dan menjelaskan keempat-empat kategori elipsis dan brevity yang terdapat dalam al-Quran tersebut.

**Kata Kunci:** Ellipsisi, Brevity, Quran, tafsiran, Wahyu

### **Introduction**

Man speaks and writes to convey his message as effectively as possible. For that matter he has developed so many ways and styles. One such style is what is called ellipsis and brevity. Long and cumbersome speech and written message fail to attract human attention. It is brief and concise statements that exert deep impact on human mind. The Qur'an has paid special attention to this psychological fact. It has most of the time addressed man in a very concise manner, omitting unnecessary details that man himself is able to grasp. At no place the Qur'an has ignored this style. Arabs of the Qur'an's revelation period were in love with this style of speech. That is why when they listened to the Qur'an, they got stunned. Today, readers of the Qur'an feel uncomfortable or confused while trying to understand the Qur'an. One main reason for such situation is that they find the Qur'anic verses and chapters apparently disconnected with another. As a matter of fact, this apparent incoherence is due to the phenomena of ellipsis and brevity. If the Qur'anic verses are read in the light of what might have been omitted, there will be no confusion at all in understanding the message. Justice, then, demands that interpretation of the Qur'an must be based, among others, on identifying ellipsis and brevity in the revelation. Muslim scholars have talked about a number of categories of such phenomenon. The author of this paper views, on the basis of his own deliberation (*tadabbur*) over the Qur'an, that the entire phenomenon of ellipsis and brevity in the Qur'an could be divided into four categories: (1) historical events, (2) certain words, (3) complete sentence, and (4) whole paragraph. This paper is to elaborate where and why these categories of this phenomenon occur in the Qur'an.

### Defining Ellipsis and Brevity

The Arabic term for ellipsis is *ḥadhf* and for brevity *ījāz*. Muslim scholars have unanimity over the occurrence of ellipsis and brevity in the Qur'an, as it was a highly eulogized component of Arabic prose and poetry of the Arabs during the pre-Islamic as well as the Qur'an's revelation period. Before any discussion on the subject is made, it is quite significant to define the literal and technical dimensions of the two terms, ellipsis and brevity.

The word *ḥadhf* in Arabic literally means to trim the thing from its side, and to delete or omit something from its place. The barber's cutting of hair is also called as *ḥadhf*. According to experts of prosody and poetics, the act of omitting the last part of the first hemistich of a poetic verse is *ḥadhf* hence the omitted part is referred to as *maḥdhūf* (omitted).<sup>1</sup> When an orator refines and edits his/her speech by excluding therefrom whatever he/she deems cumbersome, it is known as *ḥadhf*. The word *ījāz* literally denotes the state of a statement being brief and short.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Zarkashī (d. 794 A.H.) says that ellipsis is omitting from a statement either minor or major part due to some reason.<sup>3</sup> Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 A.H.) is of the view that the rhetoric (*al-balāghah*) is mainly composed of, among others, brevity and verbosity in statements.<sup>4</sup> He has quoted al-Zamakhsharī's (d. 538 A.H.) view that it is required of the rhetorician to make the statements brief wherever it is necessary and make that verbose wherever it is appropriate.<sup>5</sup> He has also referred to the view of Ibn al-Athīr (d.620 A.H.) and others that ellipsis signifies communication of a message in the shortest manner possible.<sup>6</sup> It is evident from this view that *ījāz* is the outcome of *ḥadhf*; and both constitute significant elements of the rhetoric. Al-Farāhī (d.1930 C.E.) defines *ḥadhf* as omission of obtrusively redundant elements from a statement.<sup>7</sup> He further explains that the very objectives of a speech are comprehension and influence; if

<sup>1</sup> Al-Fayrūz Ābādī, Muhammad ibn Ya'qūb, *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, Beirut, 1997), vol. 2, p. 1066; Al-Farāhīdī, al-Khalīl ibn Ahmad, *Kitāb al-'Ayn* (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, Beirut, 2001), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 726; Al-Farāhīdī, op. cit., p. 1036

<sup>3</sup> Al-Zarkashī, Badr al-Dīn, *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Dār al-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1994), vol. 3, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 2000), vol. 2, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Farāhī, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, *Rasā'il al-Imām al-Farāhī fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (al-Dā'irah al-Ḥamīdiyyah, Saraimir, Azamgarh, India, 1991), p. 171.

the speech is overloaded, it becomes complicated for the audience to comprehend and get influenced; as for the Arabs of the pre-Islamic period, the most successful speech to them was brief and effective.<sup>8</sup> It may be derived from the view of al-Farāhī that ellipsis and brevity constitute significant tools to ensure comprehension and influence of the speech. While elaborating ellipsis and brevity in classical Arabic language Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (d.1997 C.E.) says that in order to explain a message in eloquent Arabic only the necessary words are used, as the use of extra words renders speech defective, referring to the incapability of the speaker.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in the light of Muslim scholars' views ellipsis and brevity may be defined as "the most adorable phenomena which, by excluding what may be considered obtrusively redundant, render human speech precisely brief yet perfectly comprehensible."<sup>10</sup>

### **Ellipsis and Brevity in Human Speech**

Generally, Muslim scholars in the field of Qur'anic Studies and *tafsīr* claim that one of the unique features of Classical/Qur'anic Arabic is the phenomenon constituted by ellipsis and brevity, which is hardly available in other languages. For example, Iṣlāhī says that ellipsis and brevity are exclusive traits of Arabic especially Qur'anic one.<sup>11</sup> This claim needs objective scrutiny and comparative investigation. Possibly, certain particular dimensions of ellipsis and brevity may be considered genuinely exclusive quality of Arabic language. But it may not be appropriate to say that other languages are depleted of this phenomenon. It is not, as a matter of fact, a characteristic merely related to human languages; it is rather inborn feature of human speech. Everyday speech in any language speaks volumes of the existence of this feature. By nature, man, not just Arabs, stands in love with both verbosity and brevity in speech. He, at times, loves to speak, write and listen to a matter in all its detail; but he, at times, loves to speak, write and listen to a message in brief. It may not be exaggeration to state that all the human languages, whether European, American, Asian, or African have the tradition of ellipsis and brevity.

People all over the world cutting across racial, religious, political, social, and cultural boundaries exchange views, convey messages, share

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Iṣlāhī, Amīn Aḥsan, *Tadabbur-e-Qur'ān* (Taj Company, Delhi, 1997), vol. 1, Muqaddimah, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> This is the author's own coinage as precise definition is not available in the sources.

<sup>11</sup> Iṣlāhī, op. cit., vol. 1, Muqaddimah, p. 23.

ideas on various issues using brief statements with a view to making them easily comprehensible to and effective for the audience. While doing that they generally omit words, phrases, events in detail, and what could easily be understood by the audience even without clear reference to. Whether it is conversation among family members at the dinner table or it is round table conference attended by international political figures, the discussion, most of the time, is curt, precise, and brief. For instance, father asks his son at the dining table: “Did you find that?” This question appears, to the third party incomplete as it does not mention the nature of the task assigned by the Father to the son. It is a spectacular case of ellipsis and brevity in daily speech. The father and the son are both clear the meaning of the question. Probably, the father had instructed the son earlier to look for a particular file containing papers of the family property. The son was supposed to find out that missing file as soon as possible. Since the father was curious as to the whereabouts of the file, he wanted his son to brief him on that; but for that matter he did not say: “Did you try to locate the family property file? If yes, where is that file? Show it to me after the dinner.” Even the answer given by the son is very brief yet satisfactory: “Yes, I did.” He also omitted all that was understood. He was not required to state: “Yes, after you advised to trace the family property file, I began my work; I searched it everywhere including the study room, guest room, bed-rooms, and the locker; initially it seemed I would not be able to lay my hands on the file but luckily I got it in the pile of papers placed on your own study table in your master bed room just before the dinner time.” If the father or the son did not omit all the detail from their question and answer, both would feel uncomfortable with the detailed question and detailed answer.

“After nine-eleven image of Muslims all over the world has been sketched as terrorists.” This is a striking example of ellipsis and brevity. In this statement a whole event has been omitted. It is because the audience understands what has been said. In human speech and writing it is highly commendable that what is well known is to be omitted.

### **Specifying Theoretical Framework for Identifying Ellipsis and Brevity in the Qur’an**

The Qur’an came down in human language hence the humanly well-known and highly appreciable style. It has used, among other things, the elements of ellipsis and brevity to convey its messages. That is why it is the most concise yet the most comprehensive Book. One may ask a question which is quite relevant as to how and on what bases it

could be determined that this or that are omitted from this or that statement of the Qur'an. Before relevant examples of the ellipsis and brevity in the Qur'an are identified and explained, it is reasonable to explain the very methodology of identifying the two phenomena in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an was not vouchsafed to the Last Prophet all at once; it was revealed to him over a period of around 23 years. The Qur'an and the history both testify that revelation of the Qur'an was gradual rather than in one single package. It is well known that the Qur'an was compiled in non-chronological order without trimming any part thereof. The revelations of the Qur'an contain messages on various issues in repeated manner. It, at times, puts a matter in detail, but, at times, conveys that in short. It logically means that to understand even one single statement of the Qur'an, the entire Qur'an has to be taken into consideration. Muslim scholars of Qur'anic Studies and *Tafsīr* have, therefore, suggested a principle "the Qur'an interprets the Qur'an (*al-Qur'ān yufassiru al-Qur'ān*)."<sup>1</sup> This principle is the first one to be applied in tracing the ellipsis and brevity in the Qur'anic verses (*āyāt*).

The Qur'an advises man to deliberate over its messages in order to fully grasp them: (1) "Do they not ponder over the Qur'an? Had it been from any other than Allah, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy" (4:82); (2) "Do they not ponder over the Qur'an? Or are there locks on their hearts?" (47:24). *Tadabbur* (Deliberation/ Pondering) in the Qur'an is the key to open the treasures of the Qur'an. If each and every single *āyah* in the Qur'an is deliberated over in the real sense of the word, the occurrence of ellipsis and brevity may comfortably be identified. Here arises a natural question as to how *tadabbur* could be relied upon for such a serious task because reasoning might take the people to different directions hence different views on the subject of ellipsis and brevity. It should be made clear here that *tadabbur* over the Qur'an is not absolutely free reasoning; it is rather bound by some rules such as language of the Qur'an, style of the Qur'an, coherence in the Qur'an, the link among the Qur'anic statements spread all over the Qur'an. It should be born in mind that proper reasoning guided by proper principles would never lead man astray. The Qur'an has quite a number of times invited the entire humanity Muslims and non-Muslims alike to apply reason to have full grip over the messages of the Qur'an. For example: "Verily, We have revealed a Book in which there is your own description, do you not then apply your reason?" (21:10).

The Qur'an came down in a human setting addressing certain particular needs, questions, comments, and situations. These needs and situ-



ations were, at times, of general nature and, at times, of specific one. Muslim scholars have preserved the information concerning what came down in the Qur'an against what backgrounds. These reports are known in the term of Qur'anic Studies as *asbāb al-nuzūl* (socio-historical background of the revelation). Sources on *asbāb al-nuzūl* help, to a great extent, what has been omitted from this or that passage of the Qur'an. Historical reports on revelation may, at times, refer to the omitted part from the revelation of the Qur'an.

No single statement can ever be fully explained without looking at it from its particular context. While reading the Qur'anic *āyāt* one is supposed to deliberate over the entire paragraph as well as the whole chapter (*sūrah*) in which these *āyāt* occur. If every single *āyah* of the Qur'an is pondered over in isolation of other *āyāt*, one may not do justice with one's task of understanding the Qur'an. There is contextual flow in each and every single *sūrah* as well as the entire Qur'an. By taking contextual flow of Qur'anic statements into consideration, one may confidently identify the phenomena of ellipsis and brevity.

Scholars of Qur'anic Studies (*'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*) such as al-Zarkashī (d. 794 A.H.) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 A.H.), and *mufasssirūn* such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 311 A.H.) and al-Rāzī (d. 606 A.H.) have identified feature of ellipsis and brevity in some places in the Qur'an. Any study on the subject of ellipsis and brevity is supposed to take into consideration these identifications and classification of the phenomena in the Qur'an.

### Ellipsis and Brevity in the Qur'an: Classification

Al-Suyūṭī has mentioned in his work "*Al-Itqān*" three categories of brevity minus ellipsis as classified by al-Ḥusayn ibn Muhammad al-Ṭayyibī (d. 743 A.H.) in his book "*Al-Tibyān fī al-Ma'ānī wa al-Bayān*": (1) *Ījāz al-Qiṣar* (limited brevity), (2) *Ījāz al-Taqdīr* (presumptive brevity), and (3) *Ījāz al-Jāmi'* (comprehensive brevity). Limited brevity signifies confinement of the word to one single meaning. For example, two *āyāt* in *Sūrah al-Naml* "It is from Solomon; it reads: In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" (27: 30-31) refer to the letter written by Solomon. Presumptive brevity denotes additional meaning of the word spoken. For example, "It is guidance for those who are God-conscious" (2:2) says that the Qur'an is the source of guidance for those who were lost in error before their piety. Comprehensive brevity connotes various shades of meaning of the words. For example, "Verily, Allah commands for justice and generosity..." (16:90) contains Allah's command for several things i.e. the right path, and performance of all ob-

ligations in belief, interaction with others, and worship (justice); and sincerity in all devotional acts.<sup>12</sup>

These three categories represent as claimed by al-Ṭibīyy only brevity without ellipsis. But even cursory look at the definition and examples the first two kinds (limited and presumptive brevity) may suggest that brevity in any case is the outcome of ellipsis. As regards the third one (comprehensive brevity), there does not occur any ellipsis as it refers to the selection of the comprehensive words to convey several messages in the shortest possible way. Here it is proposed that the limited and presumptive categories of brevity may be considered a phenomenon combining both ellipsis and brevity, and divided into four simple categories: (1) where there is omission of socio-historical event, (2) where there is omission of word or words, (3) where there is omission of phrase or complete statement, and (4) where there is omission of a whole paragraph. Examples of each of these categories are identified and discussed here below.

#### **Omission of Socio-Historical Event**

Arabs loved to omit from historical narratives and evidences certain parts thereof and issues with a view to rendering the statement brief.<sup>13</sup> The Qur'an came down not merely in the language of its first addressees but also in their linguistic styles. The Qur'an, therefore, while referring to certain particular historical events omits the detail. Such places abound in the Qur'an. In case the Qur'an mentioned all the socio-historical events against which the revelations came down, it would have become cumbersome and bulky book making the revelation comprehensible but without psychological impact on the audience. It is the psychological impact of the revelations that led the first audience of the Qur'an to acknowledge its truthfulness. It may here be said that scholars have already placed these relevant events under *asbāb al-nuzūl*, considering them as one of the means to understand the Qur'an. Yet, one may not disagree to the fact that the Qur'an did hint at the historical events either directly or indirectly avoiding the details. Omission of the details of historical events has made the Qur'anic statements comprehensible as well as effective.

In *Sūrah al-Baqarah* there are references to several historical events from the past before the revelation of the Qur'an and also from

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<sup>12</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 106-107.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Farāhī, op. cit., p. 172.

period of the Qur'an's revelation. Its *āyah* 61 as well as *Sūrah Āli 'Im-rān*: 21 have one common part: "And they slay the Prophets without just cause." In this brief statement a seriously heinous part of the Jewish history has been referred to. It was not literary effective style to unfold the detail of that part of the Jewish history due to probably two reasons: (1) Jews were fully aware of their wrongdoing as clearly mentioned in the Qur'an, and (2) since their act of slaying the prophets such as Zakarīyya (peace be upon him) and Yaḥyā (peace be upon him) is condemned in the above *āyāt* (2:61 & 3:21), the detail of how and why they killed the Prophets, as well as identity of those Prophets were dropped from the statement.<sup>14</sup>

*Sūrah al-Baqarah*: 67-73 allude to a historical event during the period of Prophet Mūsā without its clear detail. These *āyāt* speak about Allah's command to Mūsā's follower to slaughter a heifer and strike with some part thereof a particular corpse of a murdered person so as to let the dead come to life and thus disclose the name of the murderer. From these *āyāt* the story in detail has been omitted as the direct addressees of this revelation in brief, Jews knew the event very precisely. The event in detail may be described in this way. Someone killed someone and carried the corpse far away from his area and placed it another area so that someone from there could be arraigned for the murder. When the corpse was spotted by the people, they declared it a trick of the people of the other area. Thus there arose a dispute among them with each party blaming the other. When Prophet Mūsā failed to resolve the tangle, Allah commanded his followers to sacrifice a heifer and place a part thereof on the dead so as to revive him. But initially they were reluctant to do that as they were afraid that the real murderer will be exposed. At last they did it and the dead got revived and disclosed the name of the culprit and the entire story of the crime.<sup>15</sup>

*Sūrah al-Tawbah*: 118 reads: "And so too upon the three who were left behind, who are herewith granted repentance when, behold, the earth, for all its breadth, seemed constrained to them, and their souls had become constricted, and they realized that there is no refuge from Allah except in Him; and thereupon He turned toward them in His mercy so

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Dar al-Andalus, Gibraltar, 1980), pp. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, Muhammad ibn Jarīr, *Jāmi' al-Bayān* (Dār al-Kutubb al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 400-404.

*that they might repent. It is indeed Allah who is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.”*

This is a very brief statement with the detail omitted. What has been omitted here is a historical event from the time of the Qur'an's revelation. The Prophet (s.a.w.) raised a huge army for Tabūk expedition by conscripting all the able-bodied Muslims, and marched toward the target. But three believers, Ka'b ibn Mālik, Hilāl ibn Umayyah, and Murārāh ibn Rabī' could not join the Prophet (s.a.w.) due to their lethargies; and when they really decided, almost after a month, to travel to Tabūk, the Prophet (s.a.w.) came back from his military expedition. The three gentlemen were taken by surprise but they confessed their guilt to the Prophet (s.a.w.) who punished them with total social boycott. They did not raise their eyebrows on this verdict, nor they protested against the serious punitive measure; they rather endured the suffering patiently. It did not occur to their hearts to apostate from Islam; they felt ashamed of their approach; and repented sincerely to Allah for around fifty days. While they were undergoing the boycott, they received a letter from Roman monarch inviting them to Rome for refuge. But they turned down the offer and turned toward Allah for refuge.<sup>16</sup>

*Sūrah al-Nūr: 22* reads: “*Let not those among you who are endowed with grace and ease of life ever become remiss in helping their near of kin, and the needy, and those who have left their homes in Allah's cause: let them forgive and forbear. Do you not wish that Allah will forgive you? For Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.*”

This *āyah* refers to a historical event without giving its detail. ‘Ā'ishah, the Prophet's (s.a.w.) wife was, God forbid, falsely rumored of having done something unthinkable. Some of the believers were also involved in rumor mongering. In this painful situation some believers like Abū Bakr vowed not to help the slanderers including his own cousin, Mistah; and withheld regular stipend he used to provide for them.<sup>17</sup>

*Sūrah al-Rūm: 2* is composed of only two words: *ghulibat al-Rūm* (*Romans have been defeated*). This brief historical statement is brief yet comprehensive. There was no commendable point in giving the history of when, where, how and by whom the Romans were vanquished. The addressees of this revelation knew the whole episode on battlefields where Persians imposed humiliating defeat on Byzantines and conquered

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, op. cit., vol. 6, pp. 503-508.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., vol. 9, pp. 288-290

Syria, Anatolia, Damascus, Jerusalem, Egypt, and laid siege Constantinople.<sup>18</sup>

The first *āyah* of *Sūrah al-Taḥrīm* reads: “O Prophet! Why do you, out of a desire to please your wives, prohibit something that Allah has made lawful for you”. Here there is a clear indication of an event related to the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his wives. But that event has not been mentioned with or without detail. The addressee of this revelation was the Prophet (s.a.w.); he knew very well what this Qur’anic statement sought to convey and which event it referred to. To the Qur’an it was unwise to describe that particular event in which the Prophet (s.a.w.) vowed to no longer take honey with a view to pacifying some of his wives. Had the Qur’an mentioned the event in its entirety, its message would surely have been ineffective to the Arabs.<sup>19</sup>

### Omission of Word or Words

The Qur’an appears to have repeated many of its messages at different places. One may find that the Qur’an, at times, omits certain word or words from the message it has already dealt with somewhere else. It is incumbent upon the reader of the Qur’an to identify the omitted word or words. If the omitted words are not identified, interpretation of the *āyāt* concerned might be unjustified.

*Sūrah al-Baqarah*: 2 reads: “That Book, without any doubt, there is guidance for those who are God-conscious.” The message derived from here is that the Qur’an is the source of guidance for those who are already pious. In *Sūrah al-Baqarah*: 185 it has been declared that the Qur’an is the source of guidance for the entire humanity. These two Qur’anic statements are apparently in conflict with each other. As a matter of fact there is no conflict between them. In the above statement (2: 2) two words are omitted: “*huda li al-nās*” (guidance for the people in general). The whole statement in the interpretation should be: “*dhālika al-kitāb lā rayba fīhi huda li al-nās wa huda li al-muttaqīn*” (That Book, without any doubt, there is guidance for the people in general and those who are God-conscious). Al-Suyūfī quotes someone’s view that here in 2: 2 the omitted words are “for those who are lost in error but returned to piety after being lost.”<sup>20</sup> This view concerning the omitted words in 2: 2

<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’ān* (Dar al-Andalus, Gibraltar, 1980), p. 617, Note 2.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, op. cit., vol. 12, pp. 146-150.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Suyūfī, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 106.

may not withstand scrutiny. What al-Suyūṭī refers to as omitted is indeed meaning of the word *muttaqīn*. The meaning of word should not be considered as constituting ellipsis and brevity.

*Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2: 62) reads: “*Verily, those who have attained to faith, and those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians—all who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Lord; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.*” The same message has been repeated in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* (5: 69): “*Verily, those who have attained to faith, and those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians—all who believe in Allah and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.*”

*Mufasssirūn* and other scholars interpret these *āyāt* differently. These interpretations could be classified into four views. First, these two *āyāt* talk about the believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians before the Last Prophet (s.a.w.) was raised.<sup>21</sup> Second, these two *āyāt* stand abrogated after the revelation of another *āyah* “*If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him, and in the life to come he will be the lost.*” (3:85)<sup>22</sup> Third, The two *āyāt* underscore that not only the believers but also others including Jews, Christians, and Sabians are eligible for Allah’s reward in the hereafter provided that they fulfill three conditions: (1) they believe in Allah, (2) they believe in the Last Day, and (3) they do righteous deeds. It is not necessary to believe in the Last Prophet or any Prophet as well as in the Qur’an or any scripture because the two *āyāt* do not mention the belief in the Last Prophet and in the Qur’an.<sup>23</sup> Fourth, these two *āyāt* do not seek to lay down the exhaustive list of list of faith-articles. Belief in the Last Prophet is not mentioned therein but that belief is the logical corollary of belief in Allah.<sup>24</sup> The first three views represent mere speculation. The idea of abrogation of the two above mentioned *āyāt* attributed to ‘Abd Allah ibn

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<sup>21</sup> Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān* (Dār al-Shurūq, Cairo, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 75-76.

<sup>22</sup> This is on the basis of ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbās’ view reported by Ibn Abī Ṭalḥah. The chain of reporters is: Al-Ṭabarī from al-Muthannā from Abū Ṣāliḥ from Mu ‘āwiyah ibn Ṣāliḥ from Ibn Abī Ṭalḥah from ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbās. See, Al-Ṭabarī, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 364-365.

<sup>23</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur’an* (Islamic Book Trust, Kuala Lumpur, 1999), p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’ān: English Translation of the Meaning and the Commentary* (King Fahd Qur’an Printing Complex, Al-Madinah, 1410 A.H.), P. 309; Mawdūdī, Sayyid Abul A’lā, *Tafhīm al-Qur’an* (Markazi Maktabah Islami, Delhi, 1983), vol. 1, p. 82.

‘Abbās cannot be taken as authentic because its chain of narrators is defective. The fourth seems to be logical but its proponents remain short of advancing the reason for that. Actually, in the two *āyāt* there has occurred the phenomenon of ellipsis and brevity. Two words, the Last Prophet and the Qur’an stand omitted therefrom. Thus, with the omitted words the statement is this: “... all who believe in Allah, and His Prophet, and the Book, and the Last Day...” With this rule the controversy over the meaning of the above two revelations is resolved and the fourth view as mentioned above gets justified. *Tadabbur* (deliberation) over the above two *āyāt* leads one to ask a question as to who will determine the nature and the bases of righteous deeds. The logical answer is that mention of righteous deeds warrants the belief in the Last Prophet and the Book revealed to him.<sup>25</sup>

*Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2: 106) reads: “Any message [revealed previously in Torah] which We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or a similar one [in the Qur’an]. Do you not know that Allah has the power to will anything.” This *āyah* is used as the strongest argument to validate the occurrence of abrogation in the Qur’an. Apparently it does serve as an evidence for that belief. The basis of this approach is that the words “in the Qur’an” are omitted after the word “*āyah*” (message). Thus the supporters of abrogation read the above *āyah* as: “Any message in the Qur’an which We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or a similar one in the Qur’an.”<sup>26</sup> But keeping the socio-historical background in view it is not appropriate to make such a claim. This *āyah* came down in response to Jews’ comment that if the Torah and the Qur’an were both from Allah, why did, then, the Qur’an replaced certain rules revealed in Torah.<sup>27</sup> The surely omitted words in the above *āyah* (2: 106) are what have been underlined parenthetically.

*Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2: 255) is a long *āyah*; its opening phrase is: “Allah! There is no God but He—the Living, the self-subsisting, supporter of all...” Here one word “because” (*liannahū*) is omitted. If this omitted word is inserted in the interpretation of this *āyah*, there will appear two parts of the revelation. First, claim that except Allah there is no deity. Second, it is because Allah is the Living, All-Powerful.... Arabs preferred, wherever it was possible, to omit the conjunctive words. It is also

<sup>25</sup> It represents the author’s own understanding.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Zarkashī, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 160. The interpretation quoted above is not the translation of a statement available in the source; it is rather a derived message.

<sup>27</sup> Sayyid Quṭb, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 101-102; Mawdūdī, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 101-102; Iṣlāhī, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 296-297.

what modern man speaks and writes. For example, Mr. X says: "I could not attend the meeting. I was yesterday hospitalized." It is not necessary to put the word "because" therein.

*Sūrah al-Anfāl* (8: 65-66) read: "O Prophet! Inspire the believers to the fight. If there be twenty among you who are patient (*ṣābirūn*), they might overcome two hundred [unbelievers]; if there be one hundred of you [patient], they might overcome one thousand of the unbelievers...If there be one hundred of you who are patient, they might overcome two hundred [unbelievers]; if there be one thousand of you [patient], they might overcome two thousand [unbelievers]...." In these two *āyāt* two words "unbelievers" and "patient", as underlined above, are omitted. In the first *āyah* the statement "they might overcome two hundred" has omitted the word unbelievers; as well as the statement "if there be one hundred of you" has omitted the word patient. Likewise, in the second *āyah* the same two words are dropped.

*Sūrah Luqmān* (31: 2-4) read: "These are the verses of the Wise Book—a guide and mercy for the doers of good, who establish regular prayer, and give Zakat, and have sure faith in the hereafter." It seems that only one article of faith, belief in the hereafter, is sufficient for being included in the group of good doers and the pious. This is not the message of this revelation. Once again here other articles of faith, belief in Allah, belief in His Prophet, belief in the Book have been omitted. Only one faith of article has been mentioned here most probably to emphasize and highlight the true faith in the hereafter. One may not contest the idea that the belief in the hereafter is logically preceded by other articles of faith: Belief in the Last Prophet entails belief in Allah and the Book; and it is the belief in these articles of faith that leads to the belief in the hereafter. With the application of Ellipsis and brevity to such places on the Qur'an, interpretation of the revelation becomes easier and perfectly wise.

### **Omission of Complete Sentence**

*Sūrah Āli 'Imrān* (3: 106) reads: "On the Day when some faces will be white and some faces will be black: to those whose faces will be black [will be said]: "Did you reject faith after accepting it? Taste, then, the chastisement for rejecting faith." What has been parenthetically underlined is not in the original revelation; it has been omitted.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Al-Farāhī, op. cit., p. 174.



The opening phrase of *Sūrah al-Nisā'*: 36 reads: “*And worship Allah alone and don not ascribe divinity in any way to aught beside Him. And [do] good to parents*”. The Arabic text of the second statement is “*wa bi al-wālidayni ihsānan*”. Here the verb (*aḥsinū*) is omitted.<sup>29</sup>

*Sūrah al-Nisā'* (4: 139) reads: “*As for those who take for friends unbelievers in preference to the believers—do they hope to be honored by them when behold all honor belongs to Allah alone.*” What is omitted here is the sentence “*which they will never get*” (*lan yajidūhā*) immediately after the sentence “*do they hope to be honored by them.*”<sup>30</sup>

*Sūrah al-Rūm* (30: 9) is translated by Muhammad Asad as: “*Have they, then, never journeyed about the earth and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before their time? Greater were they in power than they are; and they left a stronger impact on the earth, and built it up even better than they did; and to them came their apostles with all evidence of the truth: and so [when they rejected the truth and thereupon perished] it was not Allah who wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves.*”<sup>31</sup> The sentences as given in the parenthesis are omitted from the revelation. It was not included in the *āyah* because it was known to the addressees hence left to them to grasp the message by filling in the gap.

*Sūrah Yūnus* (10: 67) reads: “*It is He who has made the night for you, so that you might have rest therein, and the day to make things visible....*” Here the sentence “*so that you might earn your livelihood*” immediately after the original revelation “*and the day to make things visible.*” This identification of the omitted sentence is justified in the light of other *āyāt* such as 78:10-11 “*And made the night as a covering; and made the day as a means of seeking subsistence.*”<sup>32</sup>

*Sūrah al-Tahrīm* (66: 1) reads: “*O Prophet! Why do you forbid, out of desire to please your wives, what Allah has made lawful to you? And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful*”. Here before the last sentence “*And Allah is Oft-Forgiving...*” is omitted the sentence “*But Allah has forgiven you*”. This identification is the logical corollary of the ending phrase of the *āyah* “*And Allah is Oft-Forgiving....*”

*Sūrah al-Insān* (76: 3) reads: “*Verily, We have shown him the way: either grateful or ungrateful.*” It is evident from here that the sen-

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Asad, op. cit., p. 618.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Farhī, op. cit., p. 175.

tence “and now it is for him [man] to prove himself” before the portion “*either grateful or ungrateful.*” Thus the whole statement in the *āyah* is “Verily, We have shown him the way; it is now for him to prove himself either grateful or ungrateful.”

### Omission of a Whole Paragraph

*Sūrah al-Rūm* (30: 47) reads: “*And indeed before you We sent forth apostles to their peoples, and they brought to them all evidence of the truth: then, upon those who transgressed We inflicted Our retribution: and We had willed it upon Ourselves to succor the believers.*” From this *āyah* a whole passage is omitted: “Then in response to the evidence of the truth the people of the prophets had two clearly different reactions: a group of people deliberated over the message and when they found it quite rational, they accepted it wholeheartedly by submitting themselves to Allah and His Prophets; and the other group viewed it against their traditions and vowed to resist and oppose it tooth and nail by doing all that they could including inflicting physical and mental sufferings to the Prophets; such people who rejected the message persisted in their rebellious approach” just before the Qur’anic statement “*then, upon those who transgressed We inflicted Our retribution.*”

*Sūrah al-Raḥmān* (55: 1-4) reads: “*The Most Gracious! It is He who taught the Qur’an. He created man. He taught him speech.*” Here the statement that seems to have been omitted before “*It is He who taught the Qur’an*” is: “It is He who raised Muhammad as the Last Prophet (s.a.w.); and to him He revealed through angel the Qur’an.” And the omitted statement after “*He created man*” is: “He created man for His worship; and for that matter he needed guidance; and the guidance is in the Qur’an.” This identification may be justified if the sentence “*He taught him al-bayān*” is not translated as “*He taught him speech.*” The word *al-bayān* has also occurred in *Sūrah al-Qiyāmah* (75: 19) where it means the interpretation of the Qur’an. The same word in *Sūrah al-Raḥmān* (55: 4) has been used once again in the context of the Qur’an. Thus the translation should be: “He taught him the meaning of the Qur’an.”

*Sūrah al-Jumu‘ah* (62: 1) reads: “*All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of Allah, the Sovereign Supreme, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise.*” The significance of this revelation may not be fully grasped without unfolding what has been omitted from the revealed statement. When one deliberates over the mention of the four particular attributes of Allah in the beginning of the *Sūrah*, one may

identify that a whole paragraph is omitted before this *āyah*. The probably omitted paragraph here is: “Allah knows what the Jews say. They feel irritated that the Last Prophet was raised from a non-Jewish family, while they had been waiting for the Last Prophet to be raised from among themselves. Out of indignation they place the blame on Archangel Gabriel to misplace the revelation to Muhammad (s.a.w.). This Jewish observation is not justified because....” This identification is based on *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2: 97-98) where Allah exposed the Jews and their enmity toward Archangel Gabriel and the Last Prophet (s.a.w.). The omitted paragraph can explain the selection of the four attributes of Allah.

The attribute Sovereign is to say that Allah is the final authority to raise a prophet from whatever family and race He prefers. The attribute Holy is to rebut the blame that there was some defect in the plan of Allah hence He selected a non-Scriptural race for the privilege of prophethood. The attribute Almighty is to convey the message that if Allah had commanded Archangel to take the revelation to someone from a Jewish family, the angel would never had dared deviate from the command of his lord; he reached to Muhammad (s.a.w.) merely because he had been commanded to take the revelation to him and none else. The attribute Wise is to confirm that Allah did not select the Jews as the people of the Last Prophet because he needed a people with certain basic qualities such as sincerity of commitment, generosity, bravery, and fortitude. These qualities were available only in the Arabs, and not in the Jews.

*Sūrah al-Taghābun* (64: 2) reads: “*It is He who has created you; and of you are some that are unbelievers, and some that are believers: and Allah sees well all that you do.*” In this *āyah* a whole paragraph immediately after “*It is He who has created you*” is omitted: “and sent His Prophets and Messengers with clear evidence of the truth, Book, and the Balance. In the end He raised the Last Prophet to whom He revealed the Qur’an to show the right path to the people. Now with the revelation and the Last Prophet people have two different approaches, rejection of the truth, and acceptance of the truth.”

### **Role of Ellipsis and Brevity in the Interpretation of the Qur’an**

When one reads the Qur’an, one finds oneself at loss to understand the link among the apparently disjointed *āyāt* in a *sūrah*. Most of the commentators and scholars of the Qur’an, therefore, focus on the Qur’an in the piecemeal manner. Most of the *tafsīr* works particularly

those well-known in the Islamic world interpret the Qur'an word by word and sentence by sentence as if their authors are unaware of the coherence in the Qur'an. It is this reason that scholars come up with different and, at times, conflicting interpretations of the Qur'an. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (1997 C.E.) is of the view that different and conflicting interpretation of the Qur'an is consequent upon non-consideration of the coherence among all the *āyāt* of the Qur'an.<sup>33</sup> One of the ways to establish link among various components of a *sūrah* is to identify ellipsis and brevity in and among the *āyāt*. Had there been disconnection among the *āyāt* the Arabs would never have been influenced by the eloquence of the Qur'an. The first addressees of the Qur'an did not face any problem in seeing the coherence in the revelation. Today, the reader of the Qur'an faces problem in establishing link among *āyāt* of the Qur'an because there is too much distance between him and the Qur'an. In order to do justice with his understanding of the Qur'an he has to narrow down that distance. And for that matter, he has to identify, among other things, the omitted words, sentences, statements, historical events from the revelation. By identifying the phenomenon of ellipsis and brevity one can easily find each and every single *sūrah* coherent. The identification of coherence is sure to minimize the differences in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

### **Conclusion**

Man loves to speak and listen to, most of the time, what is said in brief, curtailing cumbersome verbosity. The Qur'an came down in the language as well as styles of Arabs who boasted of their eloquence and rhetoric in their poems and orations. Their eloquence and rhetoric were composed of, among other things, ellipsis and brevity. One of the main features of the Qur'anic style is, therefore, constituted by ellipsis and brevity. Generally, four kinds of ellipsis are there in the Qur'an, historical event, words, sentences, complete paragraph. Unless the ellipsis is identified in the Qur'an, its understanding may not be authentic. In the above discussion most of the identifications of the ellipsis in the Qur'an are the author's own findings.

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<sup>33</sup> Iṣlāḥī, op. cit., vol. 1, *Muqaddimah*, pp. 17-24.

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