

## Quranic Architecture, the Chambered Nautilus, and the Circle of Time

One important aspect of the Quran which has rarely if ever been properly studied, or even considered as having significance, is the way it is organized and presented, what I call its “architecture.” In one of the most basic features of that architecture, the 114 Quranic chapters, called *surahs* (which means “enclosures”), are placed roughly in order from the longest to the shortest, with the notable exception of the very first surah, *Al-Fatiha* or “The Opening,” with only seven *ayat* (a term used in reference to Quranic verses, also “signs” or “miracles,” whose singular form is *aya*). It is also the essential opening *du’a* or supplication in Islamic canonical prayer or *salat*, and a “key/ opener” (another meaning of *fatiha*) to the Quran itself. The very next surah, *Al-Baqara* or “The Cow,” is by far the longest and most comprehensive in the Quran, approximately one-twelfth of the whole book, presenting an overall view of the Islamic faith: a history of *Bani Israel* (descendants of Israel/ Jacob) led by Prophet Musa (Moses) and its lessons, often in what *not* to do, for the nascent Muslim nation led by Prophet Mohammad; revelations about Allah’s nature; Divine Law detailed and other guidance; and the difference between the faithful, disbelievers, and hypocrites. The surahs that follow gradually (and unevenly) decrease in size until we reach the very shortest surahs, ending with the short (but not shortest) surah entitled *Al-Nass* or “People.”

This order in gradually descending-sized surahs suggests a possible shape: the scroll or spiral, in which outer sections would be larger than inner ones. And such an arrangement has, as this essay shall present, profound implications about the meaning and nature of time and timelessness or eternity, the role of faith in that intersection, and can also play a role in developing a more reliable *tafseer* or interpretation of the Quran itself. Perhaps the most immediate benefit is the vision it provides for us to see the Quran as a whole in one glance, in a context familiar to us, from which we can “zoom in” to the *ayat* and surahs we need to study, giving the reader a sense of each surah’s place in the whole, which also aids as a graphic in memorization and locating specific portions of the Quran. As this essay shall examine, such architecture also reveals a symbolic “calendar” of days, months, and years, giving us, in our own time-bound world, keys and openings to Allah the Exalted and His timeless realm, for every time/ season/ moment in our most valuable resource, our limited term or lifespan.

Some scholars considered this final arrangement of surahs and *ayat* to have been the work of scribes, but others say it was sent down directly from Allah the Exalted to Prophet Mohammad as an integral part of the Quran. Even so, no particular significance has been attached to this order per se, some considering it Allah’s wisdom and therefore an inappropriate subject for speculation; others, seeing sufficient cohesive structure in the text itself (which indeed it has), found no reason to speculate about this; and yet others, seeing no apparent chronological or thematic order in the usual sense, leaving it at that or even (among orientalists) seeing this as a possible flaw. The Quran itself addresses this issue, clarifying that the order and arrangement of the Quran is directly ordained by Allah the Exalted.

*inna ‘alaynā jam ‘ahu waqur’ānah*

Indeed, upon Us is its collection and its recitation.

(*Surat Al-Qiyama* 75:17)

Allah here declares that it is He alone who “collected” the Quran together in its present and eternal arrangement — determining its exact and final order and placement, not only for the surahs but for every detail of the text — and its “recitation,” which also implies dissemination, in that by reciting the Quran, initially by the Prophet Mohammad, those who recite it are disseminating it to those who listen. Thus we can understand that the entire process of delivering and arranging the Quran is by Allah’s design and under His protection. This in turn indicates that *how* the Quran is arranged, i.e. its architecture, including the order of surahs discussed here, is integral to the message, reflecting the relationship of time to eternity. A thread of reciprocity is subtly woven into both the message and its structural elements. Ultimately this reciprocity illuminates our relationship as humans to our Creator and in that context, to time, timelessness, and our journey from one to the other.

## The Intersection of Time and Timelessness

The most significant example of the relationship between time and timelessness is the sending down of the Quran itself. One could say the Quran is a book *from the timeless perspective sent down in time*. Indeed, it was sent down on a specific night, the “Night of *Qadr*” (“Decree,” often translated as “power”), a single night in Ramadan described as being “better than a thousand months” (*Al-Qadr* 97:3) in which “descended the angels and the Spirit ...with the permission of their Lord to carry out every matter.” (*Al-Qadr* 97:4) One envisions here a *physical event*, not merely “inspiration.” The sheer power of that night indicates the weight and significance of crossing the barrier from Allah’s timeless realm into the world of time. That night is also described as being in a state of peace (*Al-Qadr* 97:5)—*salam*—but the word *salam* also means “security.” In fact, this passage shows how the Quran was, throughout this event, preserved in its eternal state, secured by a host of angels and the *spirit* (*Ruh* – a category in itself) *Jibreel* (Gabriel), whose powers and nature are extraordinary and trustworthy.

From our earthly perspective, night is when we can see the larger universe in its vastness and majesty, showing us a glimpse of the celestial realm in which is evident Allah’s greatness as Creator of the heavens and the earth, giving us a “glimpse” of timelessness, the sense one gets sitting around a campfire under the stars, away from the clamor of modern life. So the Quran had to be sent down through that realm only visible to us *at night*, the only time in which we can see a dark sky filled with stars and heavenly objects. For comparison, the *Day* of Resurrection is when all is illuminated in Allah’s *eternal light*, and thus is never referred to as night. However, the “sign” of day occurs on earth, and its alternation with night highlights the existence of two entirely different realms: “And we have made the night and day two signs...” (*Al-Isra’* 17:12). Thus the entire Quran came down to Prophet Mohammad in one night.

The Quran thereafter took twenty-three years to actually be *revealed* through Prophet Mohammad, often in response to events and people’s questions. So, one may wonder, how is it that the Quran came down in one night in the month of Ramadan, and yet took 23 years to actually be revealed to the prophet? The Night of *Qadr* was the time of actual descent from the eternal, timeless realm of Allah into the “lower” world of time, placed in the prophet’s “heart.” Once the Quran entered

the world of time, it *participated* in time, responding *interactively* to people, and revealed gradually within a time frame.

The original order of revelation during the 23-year period, called *tanzeel* or descent because its source, Allah the Exalted, is always timeless, *above* time, reflects the chronology of its dissemination to the early followers of Prophet Mohammad and their changing needs as their community matured, starting with the shorter surahs' focus on the basic tenets of faith, revealed in Makkah, gradually revealing the longer, more detailed ones in Medina, when the early Muslim community had reached a certain level of maturity. Like life itself, there are variables: some longer surahs were revealed in Makkah, some verses were revealed apart from the surahs in which they were finally placed, or contain ayat from both periods. But generally the short intense surahs, placed at the end of the Quran, were revealed earlier than the longer more practical surahs of the later period which are placed at the *beginning* of the final arrangement.

This reflects time from the perspective of both the development of a community and an individual. A child's view of time is closer to the "moment" of immediacy and choice, because of the intensity and necessity of learning on every level, coming from innocence/ ignorance to experience/ knowledge, whereas an adult lives in a more expanded sense of time, having gained a breadth of basic knowledge and experience to live within a community of people, and thus can make plans for the future, envision decisions and their consequences, and make informed or reasonable choices, all time-based acts. The Muslim community under the Prophet's leadership grew from intense choices of faith, conversion to a new religion and understanding its belief system, to fighting battles in defense of that faith as well as dealing with more detailed or mundane issues such as marriage, children, inheritance, trade, and helping those in need, all issues addressed in the longer Medinan surahs. Thus the intersection of earthly time (represented by the expanded middle/ maturity of a human lifespan) and timelessness (represented by childhood and sometimes old age) is compared to our lifespan. This, as we shall see, is a thread that runs through the Quran in various ways.

After the revelation of the entire Quran was completed, the *timeless* arrangement/ architecture was revealed, thus completing the message, and within its architectural "shell," preserved and protected from adulteration or change, i.e., the vicissitudes of time. It has also been preserved in the hearts of Muslims who memorized and recited the whole Quran in Arabic through generations, a surprisingly large constituency. This ensured preservation of its pronunciation, critical to distinguish between certain words, as well as its meaning, both elements being often lost in ancient texts, even those written in stone. It has also preserved Quranic Arabic (with a few idiomatic wobbles) as a classic language still in contemporary usage.

The Quran itself addresses the issue of being revealed (and recited) over time:

*waqur'ānan faraqnāhu litaqra-ahu 'alā l-nāsi 'alā muk'thin wanazzalnāhu tanzīla*  
And [it is] a Qur'an which We have separated [by intervals] that you might recite it to the people over a prolonged period. And We have sent it down progressively.  
(*Surat Al-Isra* ' 17:106)

“Separated” or *faraqnahu* is similar to “unpacked” or “broken apart” which is a kind of “opening” by which the Quran was revealed and disseminated in time, hence possible to be received, assimilated, and understood by humans, who cannot grasp a message of this magnitude by swallowing it whole, as it were, but rather part by part, over time, and *interactively*, that is, interacting with human lives. Many, if not most ayat were revealed *in response to questions* people asked Prophet Mohammad, or issues they were facing at a particular time. Those who read the Quran often report something similar in our time as well, as when thinking about some problem or searching for a particular verse, they happen to open the Quran to the page that literally “replies” to that thought or inquiry.

The word translated “progressively” above actually doesn’t exist in Arabic as a separate word; rather, the infinitive *tanzeel* (sent down) is used twice in a grammatical expression of emphasis by repetition, a method used frequently in the Quran in which the word is repeated (in different grammatical forms). Here *wanazzalnāhu tanzīla*, literally means “And We sent it down/ a sending down,” which implies “We sent it down/ a definite sending down.” It could also mean the Quran was sent down (as a whole) a sending down (in stages over time).<sup>1</sup>

This revelation “spaced” over time was also in consideration for Prophet Mohammad’s role as messenger, and in the necessity for perfect recitation.

*waqāla alladhīna kafarū lawlā nuzzila ‘alayhi l-qur’ānu jum’latan wāhidatan kadhālika linuthabbita bihi fuādaka warattalnāhu tartīla*

And those who disbelieve say, "Why was the Qur'an not revealed to him all at once?" Thus [it is] that We may strengthen thereby your heart. And We have spaced it distinctly.

(*Surat Al-Furqan* 25:32)

Note the phrase “strengthen thereby your heart.” The first task of the Prophet, to recite the words given to him through the Spirit Jibreel and to do so flawlessly, requires unimaginable spiritual fortitude and clarity. The task of dissemination to his people was even greater; it could only be taught in increments to give time for understanding, and thus his task was also tied up with his community. The phrase that follows, “We have spaced it distinctly” uses the format described above, literally, “We have spaced it/ a definite spacing,” thus emphasizing the precision and purpose.

Only after the entire Quran was finally revealed was it possible to gather it as a whole to be given to all humankind in its final arrangement as a complete, preserved and unchangeable timeless message, still with us in time, and therefore still interactive, that is to say, *reciprocal*. Presuming none but Allah to be the source of the Quran, noting that it is the only such Divine revelation known to be fully intact in its original language and presentation, we find in something as simple as the placement of surahs the interaction between that which is *in time* — humans, their earthly world and life as we know it — and that which is *timeless* — Allah, His eternal realm, the Hereafter, and Truth. This intersection is what I call the “circle of time” for which the Quran is a conduit or guide. At this very point, if we try to read and understand the Quran for ourselves, an exchange between the two takes place *within us*. A kind of reciprocity.

---

<sup>1</sup> This type of grammatical use is one of many examples of how the Quran utilized grammar to increase and vary the effect of words, thus layering meanings within a single statement and augmenting the power of each word.

People generally think of time as linear, time's arrow projecting from the past into the present and from there, into the future. But the Quran does not describe time this way at all; rather we are given two "positions" or states of being/ time: that which is "between their (our) hands," one could think of as the present moment where we have free will; and what is "behind them" *after* the present moment of decision, which includes both *what has already been done* (past), and the (future) *consequences* thereof, over which we do *not* have free will. Time then is defined by our *control* over what happens in it, one could say free will being in the "present." Once we take an action, we can't undo it; similarly, what God has ordained must occur in its time, and we cannot make it happen sooner or later (this fact is repeated frequently in the Quran). Within that moment of free will, however, we are given choice and are free to decide for ourselves; that future is not predetermined<sup>2</sup>, and this lack of fatalism is a deliberate and interrelated (limited by a system of complex relationships) part of Allah's plan, giving us, as a test, a crucial degree of self-determination.

*wahadaynāhu l-najdayn*

And have [We not] shown him the two ways?

(*Surat Al-Balad* 90:10)

These are the right and wrong paths with which we are confronted and between which we must choose: the moral high ground or the path of evil and destruction. In fact, this is the most important choice we are given to decide for ourselves using free will. One could say the choice between right and wrong or good and evil defines the difference between free will and the relative autonomy by which all creatures choose such things as what to eat, where to sleep, whom they prefer, etc. We are also given the chance for repentance and forgiveness; another aspect of free will, the ability to learn from our mistakes, to repent and change our behavior from bad to good and thus affect our future in this and the next life, unlike Satan the accursed. We are *created* to *learn* by making decisions, right or wrong, trial and error, hence we can be *guided* by Allah's revelations.

However, our time is limited: an "appointed term" whose end is *not* between our hands. When we die, all that will be left of us is our souls, and the evidence/ consequences of those decisions we made: our deeds. People who have had near-death experiences are sometimes shown some of their good and bad deeds; often they are shocked that what they considered good deeds were actually insignificant or harmful, and things they hadn't thought of as significant or particularly good were their saving grace. Those who are guided by the Quran need not rely on luck or random behavior; it clearly explains important decisions and which choices will have the best consequences, putting our own success in the Hereafter between our hands (in a sense, the whole point of the Quran), because when the Hour's inevitable shift to timelessness comes, our term is over, no time to do-over, and faster than the blink of an eye, either unimaginable bliss or torment becomes timeless. From *Al-Nahl* 16:77: "And the command for the Hour is not but as a blink of the eye or even sooner."

---

<sup>2</sup> It would not be a choice if it were pre-determined. The future then does not pre-exist except for Allah's decrees for it; those are secured out of the realm of time, and time cannot change them. But time itself is very real for us, and that in itself makes sense for a creation which is relational and unimaginably complex. The fact that there are choices "between our hands" means our decisions and deeds directly influence the outcome or "what is not between our hands" (for Allah is the ultimate Decider), therefore consequence is also very real and ultimately eternal.

## The Chambered Nautilus Shell

Using the Quran itself as a guide to its own interpretation, taking to heart the words of *Al-Rahman* 55:1-2, “The Almighty, Teacher of the Quran,” and *Al-Qiyama* 75:19, “then upon Us is its clarification” (referring to the Quran), we begin by considering the order of surahs as being itself a kind of graphic illustration.

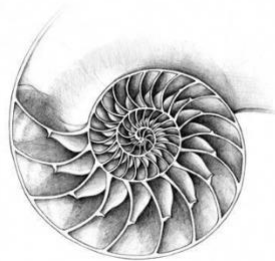
*walaqad şarrafnā lilnāsi fī hādhā l-qur'āni min kulli mathalin fa-abā aktharu l-nāsi illā kufūra*

And indeed We have brought to the people every example/ *mathal* in the Qur'an – yet most people refused (any response) except denial.

(*Surat Al-Isra* ' 17:89)

This aya refers to the Quran's use of *mathal*, translated here “example.” It can also mean comparison, similitude, parable, allegory, metaphor/ simile, or illustration in the broad sense. It is also one of the verses telling us of the all-inclusive nature of the Quran's message. So it seems reasonable to consider the possibility of visual and structural elements illustrating that message, especially considering that the Quran mentions “every example,” one such *mathal* potentially being the Quran's very architecture.

We began with the observation that the order of surahs would fit into a spiral shape. This in turn brought to mind the chambered nautilus, each of whose inner chambers could represent a separate surah, but of course with far more chambers, 114, than one finds in an actual chambered nautilus shell, which on average has around 30. Which interestingly matches the division of the Quran into 30 equal portions or *juz* ', used to measure selections for reading. This number 30 also correlates with the number of days in a lunar month and, in what will also be shown as relevant here, there are 30 degrees of arc dividing a 360 degrees' circle into 12 sections, the number twelve being significant in the calculation of time and more, especially in the Quran.



A quick glance at a cutaway of any nautilus shell showing the interior chambers reveals that the largest chambers are on the outside and they descend in size rather dramatically towards the “center” of this view, as does the Quran's text when placed in a spiral. It is this cutaway view that I shall use as a *mathal* to “open up” a graphic of Quranic architecture wherein each surah is in a distinct chamber, built in this case of words. The logic of this choice is supported by the fact that each surah is a separate unit, an “enclosure,” unlike chapters in a human-authored book or

narrative, where the chapters essentially “flow” into one another to form a logical progression. The surahs, in contrast, each contain words that appear nowhere else in the Quran except that particular surah. This is true even of the shortest surahs, and often those words are very significant. There are also phrases and words that repeat significantly in various locations throughout the Quran, and the number of these repetitions increase in some surahs more than others. These structural characteristics and stylistic effects give each surah a unique character and voice. Some, such as *Al-Rahman* or *Al-Qamar*, have rhymes and refrains repeated throughout. Others, such as *Al-Tawba* and *Al-Nisa*, are more prosaic in style.

Upon studying further, I found even more significant and unexpected correlations between the nautilus with its shell design and the Quran. Such things as its growth patterns, its unique system of buoyancy with connections between adjacent chambers, the nautilus’ diurnal behavior and relationship to the sea, and its sheer beauty and resilience over millennia make the nautilus a singularly useful *mathal* and architectural model, surprisingly apt for the Quran.

With this in mind, the shell-like architecture begins with the “opening” surah, *Al-Fatiha*, which, with its name as a clue, would be placed as the outermost “chamber” in our envisioned “nautilus” shell wherein the nautilus, the living creature such as ourselves, *resides*, closed on one end by a wall/ membrane or “septum” (the term used for dividing structures in an actual nautilus shell) and *open to the sea* on the other end. The placement of *Al-Fatiha* as the open-ended “residence” chamber in our shell image shows that prayer is our primary way of facing the “sea”, symbolic of life as a whole, a source of sustenance but also danger. *Al-Fatiha* is also the premier *du’a* (supplication) of *salat* prayer, our means of connection to Allah the Exalted. The shell provides us, in its first “chamber” or surah, words with which to implore our Creator for help and guidance in facing this life, a sort of life support, in which we acknowledge our relationship to Allah whom we praise.

On the open side is free will, representing what is “between our hands” in the present; the subsequent “chambers” contain *dhikr* or words that “remind”, in this case reminding us of what is *not* “between our hands,” referring to both the past (personal and collective, such as examples from the prophets), and knowledge (given in the Quran) of the celestial realm, how angels serve people for example, and what Allah has determined for the future such as *Al-Akhira* (the Finality), the timeless realm whose reality is a central tenet here. This intersection of *eternity* with the familiar states of present, past, and future changes the dynamic of time from a focus on surviving this world to a focus on the Hereafter, about which we have no knowledge except from what Allah reveals to us. Who in turn has decreed on Himself mercy (*Al-An’am* 6:12), and therefore sent the Quran, putting “between our hands” a guide and a doable way to survive Judgment Day and achieve the ultimate success, Allah’s acceptance.

One could say, considering the *mathal* of the chambered nautilus and its shell, that when we read, study, and memorize the Quran, we “inhabit” the Quran, whose words guide us as we face and interact with the “ocean” of life with its many storms and tests. At the same time, the Quran also begins to “inhabit” us, coming to mind in appropriate circumstances, offering us solutions and protection in ways that may even seem miraculous, as if the Quran itself is reading our hearts. This, of course, presumes that our hearts, the seat of our free will, and minds, a helpful “sense” for understanding, are open to faith in Allah and the Hereafter. The opposite of faith is *kufir* which

means literally “covering up” in the sense of hiding something one does not want to perceive or know, or put simply, denial. And how can one “inhabit” a place whose existence one denies? The Quran in contrast is called *Al-Kitab al-mubeen*, or the Clear and Unequivocal Book, the word *mubeen* being the opposite of “occult” or obscure. This, of course, would be the most important characteristic of a *guide*.

One striking relationship between the Quran as both guide and protection, and the symbolism of the chambered nautilus and its shell, is a function performed by the nautilus shell: to adjust the shell’s buoyancy.

The shell of the Chambered Nautilus fulfills the function of buoyancy, which allows the Nautilus to dive or ascend at will, by controlling the density and volume of the liquid within its shell chambers.

The chambered Nautilus inhabits different segments of the shell as it grows, continuously growing new, larger "cells" into which it moves its internal organs as it grows in maturity. All of the smaller chambers, once they become uninhabited, are used in the method described above to regulate depth.<sup>3</sup>

The nautilus’ system of buoyancy described above brings gas created by a chemical reaction into and out of the chambers through tube-like structures or *siphuncles* connecting them. Those structures are also reminiscent of textual “connections” found between adjacent surahs in the Quran. Examples of this would be how the *du’a* in *Al-Fatiha* for guidance is answered in the surah that follows it, *Al-Baqara*, and in turn the first phrase of the most famous aya from *Al-Baqara*, ayat al-Kursi, appears as the first aya of the very next surah, *Al-Imran*. This in turn suggests that “air/ gas” creating buoyancy in the nautilus’ chambers can symbolize the “spirit/ light” one finds in each surah, lifting and illuminating our lives with Allah’s wisdom and guidance as we pass through the stages and seasons, like chambers.

The shell’s growing from the inside outward graphically demonstrates the inner-to-outer/ smaller-to-larger progression that metaphorically “fits” the growth/ dissemination phase of Quranic revelation, starting with shorter surahs emphasizing eternal truths. Just as the juvenile nautilus has only a few chambers and mostly the seemingly endless (timeless) sea at its opening, the childhood stage in human development has less memory and less control over time, more here-and-now. Once a person matures, memory (personal and collective) acts as a protective “shell” surrounding the *nafs* or self, guided by both one’s own past experiences and advice/ wisdom from the experience of others.

The outer-to-inner progression of surahs in the final arrangement begins with a focus on the practical *application* of guidance at the center or “middle” of life, to which we must be receptive. This in turn brings *taqwa* or God-consciousness, metaphorically presented as *buoyancy*, to our hearts. The shell’s advantage lies in enabling the nautilus to “hang motionless in the water, ready to drop on unsuspecting prey. Their secret is a shell lined with gas-filled chambers which gave

---

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chambered\\_nautilus/shell\\_function](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chambered_nautilus/shell_function)



them *neutral buoyancy* – the ability to stay suspended in water without sinking or rising.”<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the human brain is also protected by neutral buoyancy: suspended in cerebrospinal fluid, the same principle “buoys” its weight and prevents it from pressing on the lower neural cells which would damage them. And since the nautilus is a *cephalopod*, it makes an excellent *mathal* for us, for whom the “head/ brain” is so crucial.<sup>5</sup> In our case, “predators/ prey” would be those influences that might misguide us, and “neutral buoyancy” would be the mindfulness/ *taqwa* described above.

The diurnal cycle is also a highly significant perimeter of time for humans on earth mentioned frequently in the Quran. It is similarly important to the nautilus, who rises to the surface at dusk to feed and then at dawn descends to great depths to avoid predators.<sup>6</sup> This too is a *mathal* for religion, where we must deal with both the external surface details of living and survival (associated with day), and find safety from the potential harm of worldly influence and temptation in the depths of faith (associated with night, the longest prayer time).

The concept of buoyancy is often presented in the Quran in reference to ships. In fact, the image of ships floating on water as a benefit for humankind is specified frequently in the Quran, indicating its significance. Water, being the source of and essential for life (Quran 24:45; 25:54), can be symbolically thought of as life itself. Not only in the water cycle, but in its very buoyancy, revealing that life itself also has a certain “buoyancy” and resilience to it, a mercy from Allah. We are truly buoyed by His mercy in more ways than we can count.

*al-lahu alladhī sakhara lakumu l-baḥra litajriya l-ful'ku fīhi bi-amrihi walitabtaghū min faḍlihi wala 'allakum tashkurūn*

Allah is the One who made the sea subject to your use, so that the ships can run in it by His command, and that you may seek of His provisions, and that you may be thankful.

(*Surat Al-Jathiya* 45:12)

Here we read that Allah subjected the sea for our use (by giving it a particular density, surface tension, salinity, and other characteristics). In *Ibrahim* 14:32, ships are also made subject to our use by Allah’s grace, showing that buoyancy is *relational*, achieved by the way the water and its surface tension interact with the materials and design of ships. It is then a mutual relationship between the water — symbolic of life — and that which moves through it — namely us. In the very center of the Quran, when envisioned as a nautilus-like “ark,” is the final surah entitled “People,” thus naming us as the intended “passengers” of this ark, whose passage begins by *reading*, and ends as an actual passage of those “on board” through *Al-Akhira* (the Hereafter) to the gardens of Allah’s acceptance. Implied is that when we follow the guidance of Allah and His revelations, we become the people we were created to be, surviving the tests and tribulations of time and this world by God’s guidance to be reborn and transformed in the next world of timelessness, having proven our sincerity to Allah.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ward, Peter, “Nautilus: Chambers of Secrets,” *New Scientist*, April 2, 2008. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19826501-700-nautilus-chambers-of-secrets/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neutral\\_buoyancy#Appearance\\_in\\_nature](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neutral_buoyancy#Appearance_in_nature)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Ward, as above.

The Quran's architecture presented here is then a *symbolic ark*. In Arabic the word *fulk* means a boat or ship and *jaariya* emphasizes how ships "run" through water. Both words are used in reference to Noah's ark. But the Quran describes a far more violent, overwhelming flood than that depicted in the Biblical narrative. Noah stayed with his people telling them the basic message of one God and the path of justice and compassion, until it was revealed to him that no more people would believe. It was then that Noah was commanded to build the ark, translated here as "ship."

*wa-iṣ'na 'i l-ful'ka bi-a 'yuninā wawahyinā walā tukhātib'nī fī alladhīna ḡalamū innahum mugh'raqūn*

"And build the ship in front of Us, and by Our command, and do not speak to Me regarding the unjust; they will surely be drowned."

(*Surat Hud* 11:37)

*wahiya tajrī bihim fī mawjin kal-jibāli wanādā nūḡhun ib'nahu wakāna fī ma'zilin yābunayya ir'kab ma'anā walā takun ma'a l-kāfirīn*

And while it was swiftly carrying them amid waves like mountains, Noah called to his son, who was in an isolated place: "My son, ride with us, and do not be with the rejecters!"

(*Surat Hud* 11:42)

I use the word "ark" here both because it's more specific to Noah, and because its use in English for the *tabut* or Ark of the Covenant makes the metaphorical connection between the ark and a Holy Scripture's protection/ transport through life's ocean onto the "solid ground" of *Al-Akhira*, eternity. Prophet Noah built the ark *over time* and under God's direction until the *appointed hour* of the flood, making the ark Noah's "book" or message. The flood is not only an historical event, but also a metaphor for the greater "flood" when the Day of Resurrection comes as an unimaginable cataclysm. In Noah's flood, the ocean, associated with life, turned violent and towering with "waves like mountains," which drowned Noah's disbelieving son before his eyes, as well as the disbelievers of his nation. To withstand such mountainous waves also speaks to the divinely-designed ark's sophistication, of which the disbelievers would be forever ignorant — not unlike their modern counterparts' attitude to the miraculous, sophisticated Quran.

It's important to note here that the believers and non-believers were differentiated by whether or not they boarded the ark. Thus, the only survivors were believers, those who believed in Noah's warning of a coming flood and accepted that fact as necessitating the building of a ship on dry land. This clearly correlates to believing Allah's Books/ revelations, all of which warn people of the coming cataclysm when time stops and timelessness begins. Those who disbelieve will not be guided by God's messages and therefore will not be carried safely to the "other side", the Hereafter (analogous in this *mathal* to dry land), but will be lost, and worse, separated from Allah, the definition of hell. And so when we read the Quran, we "inhabit" or "board" it, which then protects, guides, and buoys us both in this life, wherein it is so easy to sink, and the next, protecting us from the final "flood," *Al-Akhira*.

For we must be able to function on the surface of life with the things of this world in time, and yet be able to plumb the depths and see further to Allah's timeless realm and know its veracity. And to do that, we need to know how to properly control "what is between our hands:" how we *use* our time.

## The Calendar

*huwa alladhī ja`ala l-shamsa diyāan wal-qamara nūran waqaddarahu manāzila lita`lamū  
`adada l-sinīna wal-ḥisāba mā khalaqa l-lahu dhālika illā bil-ḥaḳi yufaṣṣilu l-āyāti  
liqawmin ya`lamūn*

It is He who made the sun a radiance and the moon a light and determined for it phases - *that you may know the number of years and calculation*. Allah has not created this except in truth. He explicates the signs for a people of knowledge. (Emphasis mine.)

(*Surat Yunus 10:5*)

There is a direct relationship between astronomy and the calendar as a means of calculating and measuring time in various increments, typically by months in a year. What is interesting and surprising to note in the above aya is the statement that Allah created the sun and moon appearing in phases *in order* for humans to *keep track of time*. Not, for example, simply for us to wonder at this creation or see its beauty, but for the utilitarian purpose of keeping track of time and developing more sophisticated calculations/ mathematics.

Keeping track of time directly correlates with adulthood, the need of responsible mature humans to gain a measure of control over time by measuring it, observing its repeating patterns as reflected in astronomical occurrences we can see from earth, aligned with patterns in life itself, seasons and tides, weather, myriad cycles, and more. Timekeeping is all about changing quite literally “what is between our hands” by increasing its size from a “moment” to “the present day” as it were, and beyond. For although our control may be limited, we can, by keeping track of time, envision larger increments of time that recur, making them predictable to us, allowing us to take certain actions to change the results.

For example, by predicting recurrent seasons, agriculture was developed. We can mark specific times for events/ actions to be taken, from fighting battles to preparing to fast during the month of Ramadan. The list is endless and significantly so: human cooperation and development depends on understanding, recording (marking) and asserting thereby a measure of control over how we use time, an activity whose development is still ongoing with the discovery of relativity and subsequent space travel, the use of satellites, GPS, and endless usages of technology. It is quite literally one of the most important things we do, as implied by the difference made in our lives by schedules, appointments, synchronizing, planning, work estimates, crop management, and so much more. Thus we move from individual time management to collective control over time.

Development for Muslim societies means also developing compassion, mutual cooperation, and peaceful, beneficial, ecosystem-friendly enterprise with a long-term vision for the future — a higher level of control over time made possible by establishing common goals and sharing the mutual benefits of peaceful cooperation, a practical and fulfilling ethics. We become thereby “a people of knowledge,” associated in the Quran with people of faith. The difference lies in that Muslim societies, if they are guided by the Quran, aim to control time not only for success in this world, but incorporating the ethical values and actions that will help them in the Hereafter, where this same element of time no longer will exist as we know it. We need to find a balance between

controlling and in that sense *owning* time for our own needs/ self-interest, and *relinquishing* it, sacrificing time to spend on those in need and working against oppression, examples of spending *in His Way*. Another example is to leave certain times “open” for prayer and worship, submitting to Allah’s guidance and higher values.

Measuring time is also emphasized in this aya which focuses on the two “signs” of day and night mentioned earlier:

*waja‘alnā al-layla wal-nahāra āyatayni famahawnā āyata al-layli waja‘alnā āyata l-nahāri mub‘shiratan litabtaghū faḍlan min rabbikum walita‘lamū ‘adada l-sinīna wal-ḥisāba wakulla shayin faṣṣalnāhu tafṣīla*

And We have made the night and day two signs, and We erased the sign of the night and made the sign of the day visible that you may seek bounty from your Lord and may know the number of years and calculation. And everything We have set out in detail.

(*Surat Al-Isra’* 17:12)

This regular day/night exchange is also an effective way to introduce us to the difference between time and timelessness: in the day we can live our lives and see clearly the earth and all it has (the “bounty from your Lord”) as well as work and exert control in daylight where we “belong,” our *home*; whereas the night presents us with a glimpse of a majestic but alien universe beyond our comprehension and control, the darkness itself creating a time for needed sleep, both a kind of death and of necessary relinquishing. The relevant idea for our discussion is that we see two entirely different worlds which are also time-related: one within our reach and full of life on earth over which we have a measure of control and importance, and another categorically different celestial realm, suggestive of vast distances, timelessness, and uncountable worlds over which we have no appreciable control and in which our existence seems negligible, yet which fills us with wonder.

Indeed if the nautilus shell architecture is to be symbolic of Divine guidance for “navigation,” we should also look to the heavens to connect that sphere of wisdom into our architectural model, here introduced with the terms “the number of years and calculation.” For this, we need a means to connect each surah to an increment of time in order to make the connection between our world of time and the timelessness of the surahs, like a symbolic calendar. Since the underlying dynamic of Quranic architecture is, as we have postulated above, time and its intersection with timelessness, let’s examine a significant unit of time also critical in the performance of Islamic worship and practices: the month.

*inna ‘iddata l-shuhūri ‘inda l-lahi ith’nā ‘ashara shahran fī kitābi l-lahi yawma khalaqa l-samāwāti wal-arḍa min’hā arba‘atun ḥurumun dhālika l-dīnu l-qayimu falā tazlimū fīhinna anfusakum waqātīlū l-mush’rikīna kāffatan kamā yuqātīlūnakum kāffatan wa-i‘lamū anna l-laha ma‘a l-mutaqīn*

Indeed the number of months before Allah is twelve – in the Book of Allah – since the day He created the heavens and the earth, of which four are sacred; this is the straight religion; so do not wrong yourselves in those months; and constantly fight against the polytheists as they constantly fight against you; and know well that Allah is with the God-fearing.

(*Surat Al-Tawba* 9:36)

Note the wording is “number of months before Allah,” not “number of months of the year.” This is a clear indication that this connection between month and number has meaning beyond either astronomy or the calculation of a year, something of importance. The above addition of the phrase “in the book of Allah” lends considerable weight to the idea of these twelve months having some relationship to the Quran itself. Although some scholars refer to this “Book” as being *om al-kitab*, or the “mother of the Book,” variously interpreted, here that expression is not used, hence the probability exists of the “Book” referring to the Quran. Indeed both meanings are plausible, multiplicity of meaning being a signature feature of the Quran. Could then the “months” be also a *symbolic* unit of time, whose meaning relates directly to the moon and its phases, and other “heavenly” connections, as well as life on earth?

Indeed the month is the most significant marker of time in Islam: Ramadan, the month of fasting; *Hajj*, the yearly pilgrimage to Makkah which occurs in the sacred month *thul-Hijja* named for it; the four sacred months in which hunting game and fighting (except if attacked) are prohibited; and an increment of time for other purposes such as fasting for the expiation of certain sins. And of course, the Islamic *Hijri* lunar calendar gives us regular lengths for a month as measured by days, either 29 or 30, determined by observation of the new moon’s rising (or scientific calculation in modern times), making the count easier and more predictable. The month would then be an ideal increment of time to associate with the “chambers”/ surahs in the architecture of our nautilus shell image.

When ancient Babylonians developed their yearly calendar, it was based on the constellations of the zodiac which included a few constellation variants and asterisms not in the “standard” zodiac familiar to later times. They divided the year also into twelve months, and the ecliptic into twelve sections of 30 degrees each. Since then, many different versions of zodiac-based charts have been developed, but despite their many differences (in how the 12 “houses,” analogous to our chambers, are determined), the 30 degrees element is common to most. As mentioned before, the number of chambers in an average nautilus shell is also 30, a time-related number closely related to the moon, tides, fertility cycles, and plant growth<sup>7</sup>, where not only do the moon’s phases play a part but also the moon’s position relative to the zodiac, information gardeners use to this day in referring to the Farmer’s Almanac, showing the physical relationship of the zodiac calendar to fertility cycles as they are influenced by the moon.

Considering that the early followers of Prophet Mohammad were basing their calendar on direct observation just as the ancient Arab nomads did, albeit with greater sophistication and detail, shows this is an historically *meaningful* way of organizing time, reflecting the relationship between earth and the cosmos, which one might think of in a larger sense as an immense timepiece.

Naturally, 12 months form another significant unit of time, the year. It would make sense then that each completed “cycle” of our architectural shell would contain 12 months, each month a “chamber” containing one surah, thus making these 12 surah-months a significant formative measure for the Quran’s architecture. And although the shell “grew” as surahs were revealed from the inner shorter surahs outward, once revelation was complete, the whole Quran in its final order begins from the outer, mostly longer surahs, inward. This represents, in terms of a lifetime, a

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.almanac.com/content/planting-by-the-moon>

beginning that focuses on the largest and most active *middle* of a human lifetime, when people have a greater understanding and control over time than at the beginning, as children, or sometimes also towards the end, for the elderly. Here the dominant, thematically central second surah, *Al-Baqara*, offers a comprehensive explication of Islam at the beginning of the Quran, right after the initiating prayer of *Al-Fatiha*. If one thinks of the longer surahs as representing a mature (neither very young nor very old) sense of time, the incident of the cow, from which the second surah derives its name, exemplifies that outlook, wherein the required sacrificial cow was described as follows:

*qālū ud' 'u lanā rabbaka yubayyin lanā mā hiya qāla innahu yaqūlu innahā baqaratun lā fāriḍun walā bik'run 'awānun bayna dhālika fa-if' alū mā tu'marūn*

They said, “Pray to your Lord that He may describe the cow”; said Moosa, “He says that it is a cow *neither old nor very young* but between the two conditions; so do what you are commanded.” (Emphasis mine.)

(*Surat Al-Baqara* 2:68)

Although this is the description of a sacrificial cow, it also can apply to the surah so named since the narrative is also a *mathal* in which we can find multiple applications, one being that the “cow” represents the fullness of life we must sacrifice in or devote to the path of Allah, which is also the developmental stage of its intended audience, mature and responsible adults. But if that weren't sufficient, we also have confirmation in the very middle aya of *Al-Baqara* 2:143, which mentions the word “middle” referring to the Muslim nation, where the word *wassatan* means “middle,” but also “just,” “balanced,” or “mediating:” “Thus We have appointed you a middle/ just nation, that you may be witnesses over humankind, and that the messenger may be a witness over you.” If the whole point had been only to say “just” or “balanced,” alternative words exist such as *'adl* (just), or *mutawazzin* (balanced). But the Quran is precise, using a word that also can refer to a person or social group who are neither elderly nor children but in between, with a balanced and responsible sense of time. And this word “middle” happens to be in the *middle* aya of *Al-Baqara* (286 ayat/ 2 = 143).

Returning to the nautilus shell as a calendar with 114 surahs in its chambers, we would have nine complete 12-month circles, representing nine years, plus six surahs in the tenth circle filling exactly half of it. Thus one could say the “term” represented symbolically in this entire chambered shell architecture structure would be *nine and a half years*. This period of time (represented both exactly and roughly) is alluded to in a number of places in the Quran, representing a testing or service period requiring patience, crucial to faith. Prophet Musa's 8-10 year stint serving his father-in-law as a condition of his marriage (Quran 28:27) is one example; another is Prophet Yusuf's *bid'a* years spent in prison, the word *bid'a* meaning (in one scholarly interpretation) a period of about nine years, clearly a period of separation and confinement, certainly a test; the time between Rome being conquered and their comeback in victory is also described as *bid'a* years (*Al-Rum* 30:2-5); and the number nine's association with human gestation is also a trial of patience described in *Luqman* 31:14 as “travail upon travail,” albeit in this case nine *months*, but still using an *approximate* number nine. And the most ancient of revealed prophets in the Quran after Adam is Prophet Noah, whose period of testing was the time during which he lived as a messenger/ prophet among the people to whom he was sent, serving Allah, promoting moral behavior and faith in Allah and the Hereafter. The length of that “test period” is described as follows:

*walaqad arsalnā nūḥan ilā qawmihi falabitha fihim alfa sanatin illā khamsīna ‘āman fa-  
akhadhahumu l-tūfānu wahum zālimūn*

And We certainly sent Noah to his people, and he remained among them a thousand years minus fifty years, and the flood seized them while they were wrongdoers.

(*Surat Al-‘Ankabut 29:14*)

“A thousand years minus fifty years” would be 950 years, divided by 100 would be *nine and a half years, exactly the number of “years” in our nautilus shell calendar*. This gives us another striking connection with Noah’s ark, already discussed herein as analogous to the nautilus shell graphic itself. And since this number is also simply the outcome of showing years as 12-month cycles using 114 “months”, the shell architecture is simply based on 114 divided by 12 = 9.5. Such a unique number configuration directly links Noah’s ark with the Quran. One can confirm from this what is intuitively clear: that Noah’s ark was his message, in graphic and physical form, a tangible real-life *metaphor* for Allah’s protection in a coming cataclysm, the flood being itself symbolic of the cataclysmic shift from time to timelessness of Judgment Day. Time itself in Noah’s era moved differently, certainly far more slowly than modern times; in such ancient times, with a lifetime of a thousand years even possible, the reduction to 9.5 years might also be a symbolic “translation” between Noah’s prehistoric era and later times.

Looking deeper, this number symbolizes *our* lifetime as a testing period of limited length, in which patience is required and wherein people are exposed to difficulties, such as waiting for extended periods and doing activities we don’t particularly like or even seem suited for, as well as suffering in many varied ways. Gestation also applies here: we are in a sense waiting for eternity, to be reborn into the timeless realm; from darkness (a symbolic womb, but also night) into the light (outside the womb, but also into the light of the final Day), giving even in human gestation and birth another *mathal* for resurrection.

There are two basic types of calendars, lunar and solar (lunisolar calendars being basically solar calendars with lunar information included), and both are addressed in some way in the Quran. The traditional Islamic calendar is lunar, in keeping with the primacy of a month as a unit of time and for ease of use. The Quran describes how to accurately determine the lunar month, wherein predictable and regular months are the advantage. This is at the expense of yearly measurements, which are necessarily inaccurate, changing a little each year in comparison to the seasons. Thus Muslims fast Ramadan (*Al-Baqara 2:185*) and complete the *Hajj* pilgrimage (*Al-Baqara 2:189*) at a slightly different time each year, eventually going through the seasons, making the fasting period progressively shorter as it falls during winter, gradually lengthening towards summer. This assures that religious holidays and rites are celebrated/ performed during different times of the solar year as a mercy for the believers (in cold months) and also (in hot months) as a test. And it is also another reason that the Quranic aya above does not mention 12 months as being “of the year,” since “year” could be variously interpreted, and the Quran is very accurate regarding its descriptions of time and astronomical phenomena. The year astronomically would be a solar year, but the twelve lunar months is a practical year, notably easier to measure and determine by most people using the moon’s phases.

The solar calendar, on the other hand, is not only more in tune with the yearly cycle, but also more useful for agrarian societies to measure the seasons for planting and harvest. Since the basic Islamic calendar is lunar, the Quran refers to the solar calendar in more subtle ways. For example, in reference to the “people of the cave,” the Quran refers to the period of time during which they were asleep but in an altered state as follows:

*walabithū fī kahfihim thalātha mi-atin sinīna wa-iz'dādū tis'a*  
And they remained in their cave for three hundred years plus nine more.  
(*Surat Al-Kahf* 18:25)

The three hundred years would be solar years; “plus nine more” refers to the difference between lunar and solar years for that period, the nine added to 300 solar years to express it in lunar years (one can check this online as Gregorian to lunar year conversion). The Quran could have said “three hundred and nine years” but instead used “plus nine more” to express that those years were added to “translate” the solar into lunar years. This of course is exceedingly subtle. But it is also accurate.

For most practical purposes, the Quran considers a month as 30 days, since it is the longest number of days possible in a lunar month, making the count simple and consistent. The lunar calendar therefore works out well for religious rites and for a nomadic society such as that of the Arabs, although the Arabic months’ names (first spring, first dryness, etc.) suggest an older, more seasonally-attuned calendar. In fact, to the ancient Arabs the celestial map of stars and planets was something they knew well, to a high degree of sophistication. (More on this later.)

As Islam spread to more agrarian societies such as Persia, there was a need for a solar calendar to calibrate the seasons. For this reason that the Persian mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam led a team of astronomers to develop an accurate solar calendar at the behest of Sultan Jalal for whom it was named. The Jalali calendar was adopted on March 15, 1079 CE, a little over 400 years after the Quran came.

The Jalālī calendar was a true solar calendar where the duration of each month is equal to the time of the passage of the Sun across the corresponding sign of the Zodiac.<sup>8</sup> ...Because months were computed based on *precise times of solar transit between zodiacal regions*, seasonal drift never exceeded one day, and also there was no need for a leap year in the Jalali calendar.<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

It is simply the most accurate solar calendar ever devised and was based on the zodiac, far more accurate in computing the solar year than the Gregorian calendar we use today, as it measures the months by the exact time the sun passes through each constellation of the zodiac (quite an arduous process that must be done each month, the price of such accuracy) through the exact middle of which runs the ecliptic.

---

<sup>8</sup> [https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Omar\\_Khayyam/astronomy](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Omar_Khayyam/astronomy)

<sup>9</sup> [https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Jalali\\_calendar](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Jalali_calendar)



Of the imaginary coordinate lines that astronomers and navigators use in mapping the sky, perhaps the most important one is the ecliptic, the apparent path the sun appears to take through the sky as a result of the Earth's revolution around it.<sup>10</sup>

Notice the importance for *navigation* of the ecliptic, wherein lies the zodiac, through which the moon and planets also travel. Navigation, especially that of ships, is central to our discussion of the nautilus-like architecture of the Quran, a book of guidance. Note it is called an imaginary line because it is not an empirical “line” and is geocentric rather than heliocentric. Nonetheless it is also practically very real as an observed line tracing an actual physical path the sun appears to follow relative to the earth as seen from our perspective. So although the knowledge of the earth and planets revolving around the sun has superseded that perspective and allowed for more accurate calculations of astronomical events and even time itself, our perspective from earth hasn't changed.

And indeed, it is in combining the view from earth of the heavens (our time-oriented perspective) with the view from the heavens of the earth (the eternal Divine perspective) that makes this Quranic architecture such a powerful *mathal*, revealing Allah's view of us, thus guiding our view of Him, the Exalted. That architecture gives us something like an aerial view of the Quran, where we can “zoom out” and see not the individual words and message, but their overall placement, analogous to seeing the earth from space. We can see a graphic, with which we can visualize what the Quran's “shape” looks like as a whole containing 114 surahs. We can see that it is not only Allah's message and guidance, but also a graphic image of our lifetime as humans striving and being guided towards Him.

Thus our “shell” symbolizes not only the guidance system contained in the Quran, but also *our lifetime* to which this guidance has been given. *It is both the message and the recipient*; the Word and the ear or the one who hears — the ear being also another shell-like spiral — and the mouth that reads/ recites the words (as well as the mind/ heart that perceives); the protective guidance, like an ark, and the path/ direction we take with that guidance, acting on that message, so we can share with others both guidance and path.

The name *Quran* means “recitation,” a word clearly referring to *our* input, the vocalization and interpretation of meaningful words as a whole Revelation, words filled with Truth and guidance: the Divine gift. Upon reading it (whose ultimate recipient is the human heart/mind), we open the gate to that very Divine Truth, each reading bringing us closer to it, closer to Allah, and with its guidance, buoyancy, which is not passive or inert but interactive, whose power is *activated* or realized by a receptive heart, not a heart of stone, closed and unresponsive.

*afaman sharaḥa l-lahu ṣadrahu lil'is'lāmi fahuwa 'alā nūrin min rabbihi fawaylun  
lil'qāsiyati qulūbuhum min dhik'ri l-lahi ulāika fī dalālin mubīni*

So is one whose breast Allah has expanded to [accept] Islam and he is upon a light from his Lord [like one whose heart rejects it]? Then woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of Allah. Those are in manifest error.

(*Surat Al-Zumar* 39:22)

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.space.com/5417-ecliptic-zodiac-work.html>

Even the idea of “expanding the breast” relates to buoyancy, how the “intake” opening of the nautilus shell “fills” the “empty” (i.e., without “air”) chambers with air/gas, more expansive or lighter-weight than water, giving it that power of buoyancy. Here we are shown how disbelief forms a barrier (a barrier the disbeliever placed by covering up — the root of *kufir* or denial is to “cover,” whose sound in English has a noticeable similarity to *kufir*) — between the breast, wherein lies the lungs which receive life-giving oxygen/ air symbolic of spirit, and the source of that “spirit” which is Allah’s grace, disabling access to that grace by denying it exists, thus depriving the disbeliever of “buoyancy” (the uplift and transcendence of faith) and guidance. Being thus denied expansion, instead a contraction or hardening occurs, resulting in hardened hearts. This puts the onus of responsibility on *people*, the title of the final, and in terms of its placement in the nautilus architecture, central surah.

Just as we use calendars to remind us of appointments, the Quran’s calendar reminds us of our appointment with Allah in *Al-Akhira*. But unlike our human-made calendars, the Quran’s reminders also help us *navigate* the “waters” of this life in a way that will result in reaching that all-important “appointment” prepared and ready within our hearts, supported by *dhikr* Allah and Allah’s light found therein. That meeting is described as an Hour when, instead of a day among days erasing the night as we currently experience, an irreversible singular Day will erase time itself and the worlds built on time’s framework, a Day of unfathomable moment. *This* “calendar” guides us through the intersection of time and eternity, in the process also aiding memory/ memorization; the architecture’s single image enables us to envision the entire Quran with the surahs placed meaningfully therein. And just as heavenly objects such as the sun and moon (also called *ayat*) help us measure time, we turn to the heavens again to find that meaningful placement.

## Calendar: The Zodiac Transformed

*inna fī l-samāwāti wal-arḍi laāyātīn lil'mu'minīn*

Indeed, within the heavens and earth are signs for the believers.

(*Surat Al-Jathiya* 45:3)

For ancient civilizations, the “heavens” were their direct source of timekeeping, their calendars and watches, as well as directional guides or maps. One would look up at the night sky and see, for example, the acronical rising of Mars in Aquarius, and it meant something: not only the time of the month, but perhaps also its influence on weather patterns and other possible effects on human society. Time and life were inseparable; knowledge of the constellations and planets and their various aspects seems to have been commonplace. Ancient Arabs, living a nomadic life, knew these things to the point that they inscribed them in basalt<sup>11</sup>, ancient text messages anyone living among them could understand, not some *cognoscenti*. So here we are, bathing in the concept of our superior knowledge that the earth revolves around the sun, that we can pinpoint our location on GPS and send that “dot” to someone to tell them exactly where we are. But who today knows what a heliacal rising is, or can locate the zodiac constellations, or feels the sky is actually telling them anything?

---

<sup>11</sup> Al-Jallad, Ahmad, <https://leidenislamblog.nl/articles/an-ancient-zodiac-from-arabia-discovered>

For ancient Arabs, as well as many other ancient civilizations around the world, the moon, planets, and stars, especially the constellations (including asterisms or variant star groups) of the ecliptic, referred to as the zodiac, were all familiar, making them more astronomically knowledgeable in the direct utilitarian sense than most modern people. These were also thought of as “signs,” both in the sense of time/space markers useful to people in their lives, and in the sense of myth and celestial and/or Divine power. And as mentioned earlier, the very appearance of the night sky, especially before the advent of light pollution, elicits, by its very splendor, the intuitive recognition of a power beyond ourselves and our smaller world, as well as of timelessness/ eternity. So it would be quite natural for people so aware of the heavens to be religious, to seek a connection to that which is “on high.” Even the Chinese word for God means “over heaven/ sky.”

Before the modern era, “evidence” was usually thought of as something outstanding that showed us a truth, like guideposts. The flights of birds, the way ships float on water, the huge variety of colors and characteristics of plants and animals, all these and more are mentioned in the Quran as *signs*, often “signs for those who reason.” These signs provide evidence of Allah’s relationship with all life, indeed with all creation, and in turn, of the complex interrelationships within creation itself. Such signs are dismissed in today’s dominant culture of empiricism as too “general” or lacking the rigor of scientific proof; but science by definition avoids the “unscientific” search for *meaning* as that which gives direction and value to life.

Relegating that search to a socially and intellectually limited definition of “religion” has in many ways and cultures diminished the *value of meaning* itself. *Purpose* has been relegated increasingly to the meaningless pursuit of monetary gain, which for those without means has meant mere survival. Numbers are abstract digital constructs, the more abstract the more “valuable.” Time is often a mere regulatory metronome by which stopping and starting activities are measured. Light pollution obscures the magnificence of the heavens at night. In such a world, randomness and petty politics, acquisition and comforting platitudes replace true religion, the meaning and purpose of life. Even before light pollution obliterated most of the stars, the empirical attitude itself diminished the sacred for us, as shown and countered eloquently by William Blake:

What it will be Questioned When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire  
somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host  
crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty . . . <sup>12</sup>

Looking at the first 12 surahs of the Quran, inspired by their titles but also examining their content, I noticed a striking correlation between these surahs and the “classic twelve” constellations/ signs of the zodiac. Could this be the “meaningful placement,” each surah representing not only a month, the increment of time traditionally measured by those constellations, but also pointing to the *signs* symbolizing the stages through which earthly life passes in concert with their appearance in the night sky? Each surah or “month” is filled with Allah’s guiding message to humankind, guiding our attention to Allah, the Almighty, All-Merciful Creator of the heavens and the earth, and to *Al-Akhira*, the Finality/ Hereafter. One can think of the surahs as guideposts, guiding us through time (with timely examples of the prophets and others) to the unimaginably catastrophic shift from the

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 555.

world of time as we know it to timelessness, Judgment Day, and our return to Allah the Exalted. On earth and in the heavens, Allah has given us guidance in the form of natural phenomena, such as rivers and roads, as well as stars and planets.

*wa 'alāmātin wabil-najmi hum yahtadūn*  
And landmarks. And by the stars they are [also] guided.  
(*Surat Al-Nahl* 16:16)

Using a commonly understood set of *buruj*, the Arabic word for constellations (also the title of the 85<sup>th</sup> surah, *Al-Buruj*), the connection of the heavens with life on earth provides a memorable *mathal* for the month not merely as an increment of time, but a *meaningful* one. Indeed, the yearly cycle is deeply meaningful to people not only in ancient cultures, for whom the search for meaning was necessary and primal, but to all people of all times. This includes the modern era in which one could surmise that the current popularity of astrology and spiritualism is an attempt to find that connection with the eternal realm/ reality.

What makes astrology, once a respected part of astronomy as a search for greater meaning and truth, now maligned by both science and religion, is its use in horoscopes (a fairly recent invention in England as a money-making project) as a means of divination in a both worldly yet irrational way, subject to the whims and quirks of popular culture. But much of “popular culture” also reflects our current society’s great need for guidance toward a soul-fulfilling path by its very estrangement from it. The same symbols once associated with guidance and placement in a greater cosmic order are taken as cheap commodities or psychologically useful constructs. This is far from the view of people at the time of Prophet Mohammad. Or even their cultural ancestors.

That ancient cultures relied on zodiac-based calendars is well-known, but has recently been shown in relation to ancient Arabia as well. For over a thousand years, ancient Arabian culture had been an unknown quantity disparaged by medieval scholars of the Abbasid period as belonging to an “age of ignorance,” illiterate and living in darkness. However, recent linguistic and historical studies of archaeological treasures found a century ago in an uninhabited basalt desert south of Damascus called the Harrah, has revealed that Arabian nomads, who inhabited the region two thousand years ago, had their own zodiac, including elements of Babylonian zodiac calendars as well as of the Greek/ Aramaic zodiac still in use today, making it a unique midpoint culture between the two. Dr. Ahmad Al-Jallad, a linguistics scholar of ancient civilizations/ languages, especially those of the Middle East, made this discovery in reference to those Ancient Arabs:

The most remarkable witness to the lives of its ancient population is the tens of thousands of inscriptions adorning the desert’s rocks. These texts are written in an indigenous Arabian alphabet known as Safaitic and express a form of Old Arabic... The Safaitic inscriptions are notoriously difficult to understand, and many of them contain re-occurring sets of enigmatic words which defy interpretation...By considering not only their etymologies, but the way they pattern with the seasons and other chronological information, I have recently shown that they are in fact *the names of the ecliptic constellations, the zodiac, and were used to reckon time.*<sup>13</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly, once Dr. Jallad decoded some of the Safaitic inscriptions, he could read it like Arabic (as it was a Semitic way of writing) to local Bedouins, who found it understandable — a two thousand years-old language! This shows us the relevance of that culture to that of the much-later era of Prophet Mohammad. Of course, much had been changed by that time (calligraphic writing replacing the Safaitic alphabet, for one), yet although the method of time-keeping developed into a lunar calendar, the close awareness of astronomical phenomena such as the zodiac's connection to earthly seasons/ weather patterns, and time generally, did not, even though the zodiac names and starting/ ending point for years varied.

It should also be noted that Safaitic was a unique form of writing developed by this nomadic culture and inscribed on basalt slabs, each rock having a different inscription, most beginning with an invocation to various gods. This invocation took the form *bism* or “in the name of” just as in the *Bismalah* (the invocation that precedes every surah except *Al-Tawba*), except followed instead by the names of multiple deities, a few of whom are mentioned in the Quran as idols with no existence or power to help or harm and not to be worshipped. This is another example of how the Quran redirects human expressions and ideas to Allah's truth and guidance. The *signs* of the zodiac, whatever their origins, have similarly been successfully transformed in the Quran to illuminating symbols of our path to Allah the Exalted, His wisdom, and mercy in the Hereafter.

It was a formulaic type of writing/ composition, but Dr. Al-Jallad found poetry there (the oldest example of literature in Arabian culture) as well as illustrations.<sup>14</sup> The Quran was sent to a unique civilization, neither unlettered nor without knowledge, both believers (as shown by the invocations in their writing) and skeptics (as indicated in the Quranic references to them as constantly questioning the idea of resurrection after death), without cities or agrarian-type settlements but highly aware of celestial movements and objects.

By the time the Quran came, the Arabs had developed a lunar calendar, which Muslims transformed into the *Hijri* calendar,<sup>15</sup> for which the names of an older seasonal solar calendar were kept, bringing another meaningful connection to the first twelve surahs. That connection fits into the nautilus architecture, a graphic that tells us “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” (*Ecclesiastes* 3:1) The Quran's design incorporates this understanding of time from both a human, earthly perspective, and from the timeless Divine perspective. And that very intersection transforms the zodiac, constellations in Allah's celestial timepiece, into meaningful “signs” or *ayat* revealing our connection to Him, and to life itself as a *purposeful* path towards Allah and eternity.

### **The Surahs and the Calendar: Connections to Meaning**

And so we re-examine the first surah, *Al-Fatiha*, “the Opening,” in light of its placement within the nautilus shell “calendar.” That opening is a new beginning, the spring equinox, the moment the sun transits into the constellation Aries the Ram, representing the creative spark, the sprouting of new life, the moment which the Jalali calendar marks as the beginning of a new year (and with it a time for renewal).

---

<sup>14</sup> Muhanna, Elias, “A New History of Arabia, Written in Stone,” *The New Yorker*, May 23, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> So named because it begins a new era with the year Prophet Mohammad emigrated from Makkah to Madina, counting that year as Year One.

Even the Ram image has significance here, reminding us of the ram substituted by Allah the Exalted when Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) was about to ritually sacrifice his son Isma'il (Ishmael), who in the Quran was a willing adult participant, and who in fact interpreted his father's dream to mean his father *must* sacrifice him (*Al-Saffat* 32:102-11), an event the Quran describes as "when they both had submitted." Symbolically one could consider it the sacrifice of the ego or *nafs* (self), strongly associated with Aries.

Both Prophets Ibrahim and Isma'il put their faith in Allah, that whatever He commands is good and just even if its purpose is not apparent to them. The Ram then symbolizes both Allah's mercy (providing the ram) *and* the sacrifices (of our egos/ personal needs) we must make to prove ourselves to Him. It also teaches us as it taught Ibrahim, in a harrowing experience, that animals too are living beings, often young, whose lives we must respect, even though their sacrifice has been allowed by Allah. For this reason, *dhikr* Allah must accompany the slaughter, reminding us that taking an animal's life is only by His will, not to be taken lightly. The first *Hijri* calendar month *Muharram* (prohibition) correlates with this month, as it is one of the sacred months in which fighting (except for self-defense) and hunting are prohibited.

*Al-Fatiha*, as the essential *du'a* of daily *salat* prayer, which builds in believers' hearts, over time, a "house" or "chamber" of prayer, makes this first chamber/ "house" a *House of Prayer* or a *masjid* (mosque), which means literally "place of *prostration*," the position exemplifying submission and sacrifice of the ego. Its placement in the New Year position shows us prayer is the way to renewal and repentance, also notably a Jewish New Year tradition where the ram's horn or *shofar* is sounded, that horn's opening resembling that of the nautilus shell. At the same time, being the only "open-ended" chamber makes it also the *place of free will* and choice, what is "between our hands," and thus this chamber is where we, like the nautilus, reside, decide, and maintain (or deny) our connection to Allah the All-Merciful.

The title of the very next 2<sup>nd</sup> surah, *Al-Baqara*, "The Cow," as with most Quranic surahs, is taken from the text of the named surah. But often the titles seem not to encapsulate or point to the meaning of the whole surah in the way one might expect of a title. On the other hand, the second sign of the zodiac in whose "chamber" this surah resides is Taurus, the bull, and this sign being considered feminine, "The Cow" or *Al-Baqara* is actually a more appropriate name for it.

The incident of the "cow," from which the surah derives its name, refers to when Allah commanded *Bani Isra'il* through Prophet Musa (Moses) to sacrifice a cow, to which they responded with a series of questions regarding its appearance, bickering over superficial details, "appearances" associated with the sign of Taurus. The 2<sup>nd</sup> *Hijri* month, *Safar*, means "yellow", the specified color of the cow to be sacrificed (*Al-Baqara* 2:69), further supporting this connection. Taurus is associated with value systems and development/ fertility/ wealth, which in modern interpretations is usually associated with money, the empirical take on values; the Quran unequivocally rejects empiricism as a value system, thus the values it establishes are instead the deeper religious/ ethical ones. In the same context, the central section of this surah, when examined chiasmically,<sup>16</sup> highlights the change of the *qibla* (direction of *salat*) from Jerusalem or *Al-Quds* to Makkah.

---

<sup>16</sup> Farrin, Raymond, "Surat al-Baqara: a Structural Analysis," *The Muslim World, Hartford Seminary*. 2010, pp.24-5. [https://www.academia.edu/8642515/Surat\\_al-Baqarah\\_A\\_Structural\\_Analysis](https://www.academia.edu/8642515/Surat_al-Baqarah_A_Structural_Analysis)

Changing the *qibla* direction was a major test for Prophet Mohammad's followers of choosing between this world's values of appearances (quibbling over a direction on earth), or eternal values, where we face our Creator, who is not limited to a direction, as per 2:142, "to Allah belongs the east and the west." This shows us another deeper truth, as described below:

Here the sura underscores Islam's position as the new middle of the revealed religions, between the formalism of Judaism, as illustrated in [section] C through the parable of the cow, and the doctrinal extravagance of Christianity, highlighted in the previous section. *Islam is positioned as the golden mean....*

The qibla message is connected then to the larger point, applicable to all mankind: each community has its own orientation, verse 148 tells us, so compete with each other in goodness and God will bring you together.<sup>17</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

The "golden mean" emphasized here correlates directly to our previous discussion of the word "middle" used to describe the Muslim nation and its role. Dr. Farrin's commentary above shows us how this word takes us a step further, how the Quran envisions Muslims as *peacemakers*, another interpretation of "mediators," competing in righteousness instead of "the things of this world" of appearances, and in return, Allah will "bring [us] together." Which literally came to pass when Prophet Mohammad led his nation, with Allah's help, to victory over the Quraish in the conquest of Makkah, with almost no bloodshed.

And so this surah gives us clear laws and practical guidelines to help us understand and establish the best *system* of values, the main focus of both this surah and its placement in what could be termed the *House of Values*. Now, just as in Prophet Musa's time, people can get caught up in endless questions about appearance (like "wearing the beard" as a sign of men's faith or arguing over dress codes) while ignoring the deeper more important issues given prominence in the Quran relating to the Hereafter. "The Cow," as mentioned earlier, symbolizing wealth, civilization, and success, can be better expressed in righteousness, justice, and compassion. The cow's *sacrifice* then symbolizes sacrificing temporary worldly riches and power for the eternal paradise of Allah's Presence, the Source of all worth and ultimate success in this world and the next.

The third surah, *Al-Imran*, whose name means "the family of Imran," speaks to the issue of Divine Books sent, and how those who ignore or misrepresent/ alter them and their message will suffer severe consequences. It particularly emphasizes the danger to believers of being influenced or misled by those who seek to confuse them by misinterpreting symbolic/ allegorical verses which usually have layered meanings (*Al-Imran* 2:7). This subject of books, communication, and language is associated with the third house of the zodiac, the sign of Gemini, the twins, making the many verses relating to the Divine messages relevant to this symbolic placement.

In another example, in this *third* chamber or *House of Communication*, when the Spirit Jibreel (Gabriel) gave Prophet Zakariah, the uncle and caretaker of Maryam, news that he would have the son he had prayed for, he was incredulous because of his and his wife's advanced age and asked for a sign, to which he was told his sign would be not to speak for *three* days. Two Quranic ayat describe this in interestingly different ways: *Al-Imran* 3:41 describes it as three *days*, whereas *Maryam* 19:10 describes it as three *nights*. Of course, at the time and place the Quran was sent,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the 24-hour day was not in use, so one could say these two ayat taken together show that he did not speak for three 24-hour periods, or the modern sense of *three* days. Is the Quran not sent to *all* the worlds, including eras of time?

Relating to “the twins” of Gemini, the name *Imran* has an “-an” ending associated with the Arabic grammatical case referring to “two” or a pair. *Al-Imran* also introduces us to the second of a subtly inferred “pair” of important *spiritual* “twins.” Notably, from the family of Imran are Prophet Musa (Moses), featured frequently in *Al-Baqara* but mentioned in *Al-Imran* only once (3:84) in a list of other prophets admonishing the believers not to distinguish between them; and Maryam (Mary) mother of Prophet Eissa (Jesus), the highest status and most honored of women by Allah, featured in this surah as well as *Maryam*, named after her. Here we have two high-status and important religious figures, one male and one female, of the family of Imran.

Musa is the most prominently-mentioned Prophet in the Quran; Maryam is the most prominently-mentioned woman in the Quran. In fact, she meets the basic specifications of a prophet: visitation by the Spirit Jibreel (Gabriel) (*Al-Imran* 3:45-7; *Maryam* 19:17-21), a parent’s prayer for consecration to God (*Al-Imran* 3:35); being an orphan or somehow separated from a father (Maryam was adopted by Prophet Zachariah per 3:37); a miracle in the form of “provision” miraculously appearing in her place of prayer (*Al-Imran* 3:37); and a “message” in the form of her son ‘Eissa (Jesus) who is called *Word* (*Al-Imran* 3:45), speaking miraculously while an infant on her behalf (*Al-Imran* 3:46, *Maryam* 19:24-6; 29-33), although as a woman in her patriarchal society, she could not be a prophet in the sense of leading a community. The surah itself states that Imran is Maryam’s father; Prophet Musa’s father was also named Imran. In *Maryam* she is described as “sister of Haroun (Aaron),” also well-known as the name of Prophet Musa’s brother. They were both orphaned as infants and both their names begin with the Arabic letter *meem*, also the first letter of Prophet Mohammad’s name (who was also orphaned at an early age), making these three most prominent prophet/ prophet-status figures outstanding and set apart in another more subtle way.

Maryam and Musa lived in entirely different eras, estimated to be at least 1,000 years apart. So the inference that Maryam and Prophet Musa are spiritual or “soul” twins spans a great distance of time, as well as their being different genders. Both being given high status by Allah, and examples of patience and faith for Muslims, shows that in matters of faith, men and women are equal in value (*Al-Hujarat* 49:13), one could say “peers,” and that the most basic values do not change with time. Which leads us to the next surah’s focus on justice.

The 4th surah, *Al-Nisa’* (Women), focuses on justice, compassion, and matters of the heart (having 4 chambers, the number of this surah). Here the presentation of justice *begins* with those often oppressed in patriarchal systems, women and orphans, presenting laws and ways of empowering them that could work for the community among whom Prophet Mohammad was sent. This is a strikingly appropriate subject for Cancer, a feminine sign associated with motherhood and emotional development. The first aya of this surah uses the word “womb” from *Al-Imran* 3:6, “It is He who forms you in the wombs” as well as emphasizing Allah’s being a witness of all we do, from *Al-Imran* 3:5, “nothing is hidden from Allah in the heaven nor in the earth.” This gives us a textual connection from *Al-Imran* directly to the major themes of *Al-Nisa’* just as we found such connections between the other adjacent surahs examined here.



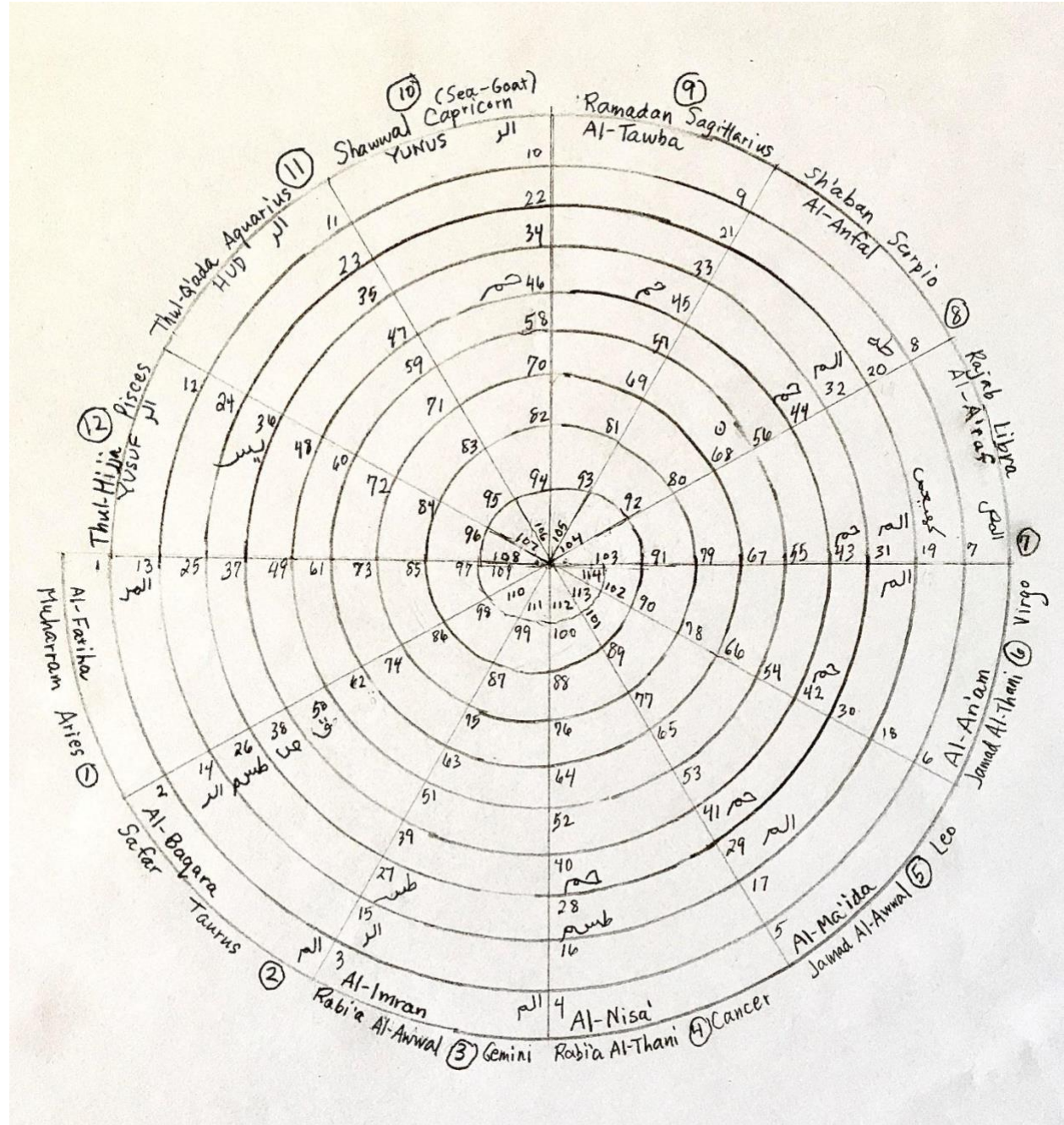
This surah and its title not only highlight the Quran's support of justice for women, but it also speaks to justice in general, compassion being the "development of emotion" starting with family ties, and inclusive of those, exemplified by orphans, whose family ties have been cut off. It also focuses on inheritance, by which wealth/ property is fairly distributed between family members. These rules were set in a society where men were mainly the breadwinners, a situation which has only changed to include women in the workforce relatively recently. And the Quran's basic tenets of *justice* as the overriding principle can be applied to varying circumstances. The latter half of this surah prescribes justice in myriad other applications as well, such as marriage (4:4, 4:23-5), interpreting Divine books (4:113, 4:149) or security-related matters (4:83), to casual speech such as greetings (4:86), even the conduct of war (4:90). It's another comprehensive surah which could be termed the chamber or *House of Justice*.

One could say that the Quran not only transformed the Arabic language to "divine" heights of poetic and expressive capability, but also gave a high purpose to the symbolic language of the zodiac signs, as well as the language of numbers, thus imbuing them too with a more transcendent *qualitative* meaning and power. The significance of the number twelve gives us an example of that.

To that end, we discuss the 12<sup>th</sup> and last surah of this first year-cycle, *Yusuf* (Joseph, the 12<sup>th</sup> son of Prophet Yaqub or Jacob), whose story the Quran itself describes as "beautiful," and which focuses almost entirely on this prophet. The 12<sup>th</sup> Zodiac sign is Pisces (fish), a sign associated with extreme beauty and also fulfillment, both exemplified in the person and story of Prophet Yusuf. The fulfillment aspect of this sign is also strikingly reflected in the associated *Hijri* month named *Thul Hijja*, the month of the *Hajj* or pilgrimage, the fulfillment of the year's "journey." It is the most "spiritual" sign in the sense of being associated with a heightened sensitivity to those things which are not apparent or obvious to the five "outer" senses.

Dreams are an example of this, and Prophet Yusuf was known for dream interpretation, famously the dream of the King, named *Aziz* in the Quran (indicating he was not one of the Pharaohs, a fact supported by historical interpretations). As for the beauty associated with this sign, Yusuf's beauty was such that Aziz's wife fell in love with him (he had been taken into the palace as a slave after being saved from the well where his brothers in jealousy had thrown him), and when he resisted her advances, she had him falsely accused of trying to seduce her. When the women of the city began gossiping about how Aziz's wife was in love with her slave, she invited them to a luxurious banquet, giving knives to each. She then told Yusuf to enter there, whereupon the women cut their hands, so entranced were they by his beauty, exclaiming he must be not mortal but an angel (*Yusuf* 12:30-1). Prison and confinement are associated with Pisces as a counterpoint to its ever-expansive nature, and here, to hide her own guilt and despite witnesses exonerating Yusuf, King Aziz's wife had him thrown in prison. But he was "reborn" from (both the well and) prison to interpret the king's dream and be given high status in the kingdom, whereafter his father, mother, and brothers were reunited with him while they prostrated, fulfilling the dream he had at the beginning of the surah, pointing to how Allah's grace creates, in our human and often difficult lives, openings to fulfillment when we put our trust in Him.

That each of the first twelve surahs of the Quran has a meaningful connection with a zodiac sign when in its final order is a significant observation, and that it is possible to also correlate the Islamic calendar months with this arrangement, as mentioned briefly here, shows us how the zodiac calendar is not confined to a culture or application but rather is a specific and recognizable symbolic language tied to the human, earthly cycle of seasons, and its application to this architecture relates to its historical role in time-keeping and navigation. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explicate all twelve of the first cycle of surahs, let alone all 114, but it is my hope that the few examples above illustrate how far-reaching this calendric architecture and its illuminating symbolic interrelationships relating to *tafseer* (Quranic interpretation) could be.



[The above chart was drawn by the author to illustrate the ‘architecture’ of the Quran.]

Viewing the surahs of the Quran in this image, we can see a chronology that mirrors our human, mortal lives through months, seasons, and years as an ark or chambered “vessel,” filled with the guidance of our Creator, a calendar of days to which we return for guidance and planning, a “home base” secured with the buoyancy and ballast of daily *salat* prayer, no longer lost at sea. The nautilus design and *mathal* give us a way to envision the entire Quran in a wholistic way, understanding its parts based on an understanding of the whole and their relationship to it. It can help with memorization by turning the long list of surahs into a visual graphic, which in turn also enables us to more readily picture the placement of surahs and find connections between them, as well as between narratives and other elements. It can inspire us, and reveal relationships between ayat we might otherwise miss.

The Quran, sent from Allah the Exalted down to us in time, shows us how our lifetimes can be embedded in His guidance, and His guidance can be embedded in our lifetimes. The sending down of the Quran in one night as a timeless message in time brings us back to the aya quoted at the beginning of this essay from *Al-Qadr*, “*Laylat Al-Qadr* (the Night of Decree) is better than a thousand months,” where the number “thousand” refers to both the night in which the Quran came and its place in our lifetime (a thousand months being about 83.33 years, within the high range of a human lifetime). “Better than” is a qualitative value, and Muslims usually consider it as a single night in Ramadan, considered to be an odd-numbered day from the last ten days of Ramadan, which period the devout traditionally spend in prayer and fasting, at the *masjid* (mosque) if possible. But as it represents a human lifetime, this one night is then *better* than an entire lifetime, suggesting that when we “board” (read and are guided by) this “ark,” we become our *better* selves.

Here we need to examine the word *qadr*, whose meaning as used in the Quran is associated with *measurement* and *value* in the sense of giving something its due, or proper value. It also is associated with that which Allah ordains or decrees. The word *thousand* as used in the Quran “powers up” that to which it is applied by impugning it with a Divine connection, giving it a timeless value. A Divine “day,” for example, is given a general value of a “thousand years” as in this excerpt from *Al-Hajj* 22:47: “And indeed, a day with your Lord is like a thousand years of those which you count.” These numbers are not to be taken literally to inform us of some “factual” data in the modern reduced-to-empirical sense, but rather speak to us on a symbolic level; this aya literally tells us how the power of the word “thousand” amplifies the value of a number we use to count, here from a single *day* to a thousand *years*.

Bearing this in mind, we can think of this issue in two ways. The actual determination of a specific night to be a recurring annual *Laylat al-Qadr* may be possible to determine using the Quranic calendar architecture as a reference, in which Ramadan falls in the ninth chamber at the top of the spiral. In this position, the winter solstice, the longest night and hence the most celestial time of the year, comes at the end of Ramadan, hinting that indeed the winter solstice could be *Laylat Al-Qadr*, when all prayers are said to be answered. But the Quran gives us a *lunar* calendar whereas the winter solstice is a *solar* calendar event, making it a more rare occurrence in the lunar Ramadan (approximately once every 32 years), although an accurately predictable *astronomical* event. And most scholars say we cannot know for sure exactly when it is. However, Allah promises the

believers their eternal reward for faith and righteousness, and responses to their prayers, *regardless of the timing* of their deeds or prayers.

In another sense, if we read the Quran with a receptive heart, and this may take time, the night of *Qadr*, or what we seek in it, can also be *the time when our hearts open up to Allah's message*, thus augmenting our own lifetime with its guidance, its timeless message revealed literally, again, to us. One could read the Quran for years without its meaning and truth actually entering one's heart. On the other hand, the receptive heart cannot help but be moved toward the light of knowledge. This is, in turn, the *qadr* or the measurement/ determination of Allah the Exalted, our sincerity towards Him being a major factor.

Nothing we could possibly do or that could possibly happen to us would be better than to be accepted by Allah who alone enables our survival through the Hereafter to enter the timeless realm of eternity in His wondrous Presence. The Quran brings us that Divine measure into our lifetime holding His eternity within us. Is there a better power than the power over death? Indeed there is: the power over that which would separate us from Allah the Living and His Light and transcendent love. A power we can name: *dhikr* Allah, the invocation and remembering of Allah. Yes, and another name for the Quran, *Al-Dhikr*, the reminder.

And as long as there is time and we (as humanity) are alive in it, that message is interactive, that is to say *reciprocal*, just as it was at the time of Prophet Mohammad, entrusted to our hearts and our power of thinking to discover how it continuously enlightens, uplifts, and gives us the buoyancy we so deeply need — for our survival, especially when we return to Allah, completing the circle of time.