


Rukū' as a Semantic Unit: A Novel Approach to Interpreting the Qur'an with a Case Study of the Tenth Rukū' of Surah al-Nahl

Zahra Rafei Majoomerd¹ 

Master of Qur'an and Hadith Sciences, Meybod University, Meybod, Iran

Ahmad Zarezardini² 

Associate Professor, Department of Qur'an and Hadith Sciences, Faculty of Theology, Meybod University, Meybod, Iran

Yahya Mirhoseini³ 

Associate Professor, Department of Qur'an and Hadith Sciences, Faculty of Theology, Meybod University, Meybod, Iran

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ABSTRACT:

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One of the internal divisions of the Qur'anic text is the *rukū'*, which, as a semantic unit, provides significant potential for rereading the text and uncovering new interpretive levels. Nevertheless, this division has been largely neglected in many contemporary Qur'anic codices and rarely addressed in Qur'anic studies. The present study aims to propose and apply an approach of Qur'anic interpretation based on *rukū'* analysis, focusing on the tenth *rukū'* of Surah al-Nahl (Q. 16:71–76). Conducted through a descriptive-analytical approach, the research proceeds in three stages: first, elaborating the proposed approach of understanding the Qur'an through *rukū'* units; second, applying this approach to the tenth *rukū'* of Surah al-Nahl as a paragraph-like semantic unit; and third, assessing the findings by comparing them with the exegetical categorizations of other commentators.

The results indicate that verses 71–76 of Surah al-Nahl form a structurally and thematically coherent passage that can be identified as an independent semantic unit. Within this framework, the topic sentence, supporting statements, transitional sentence, and concluding sentences were identified. Furthermore, a comparative critique of three exegetes' approaches revealed

1. Email Address: zahra1379rafiei@gmail.com

2. Corresponding Author. Email Address: zarezardini@meybod.ac.ir

3. Email Address: mirhoseini@meybod.ac.ir

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that neglecting *rukū'* divisions in existing commentaries has often led to semantic discontinuity, disruption of textual coherence, deviation from the surah's main objective, and reader confusion. Accordingly, it can be concluded that a *rukū'*-based reading of Qur'anic surahs not only highlights the thematic independence of each semantic unit but also ensures their internal coherence and contributes to identifying the overarching purpose of the surah. This approach may thus serve as an effective model for Qur'anic exegesis and a means of avoiding the interpretive challenges resulting from fragmented exegetical categorizations.

KEYWORDS: The Qur'an, *rukū'āt*, Semantic unit, interpretive levels, Paragraph, *sīyāq*.

1. Introduction

The introduction of new methods in understanding the Qur'an paves the way for novel findings in Qur'anic studies, encompassing its linguistic, semantic, and theological dimensions. Such methods must not only prove to be effective but also applicable in practice, and their results should be comparable with those obtained through parallel approaches. One of the less-explored areas in Qur'anic studies is the investigation of semantic units within the text, through which distinct discourses of the Qur'an can be identified, offering a deeper and more precise understanding of the scripture. The present study seeks to employ *rukū'* divisions as a means to advance this objective and to propose a methodological framework for Qur'anic reading and analysis.

Rukū' is one of the internal subdivisions of the Qur'an, referring to a cluster of verses that share a unified theme and semantic coherence. A *rukū'* begins with the introduction of a new subject and ends with a thematic or discursive transition (Khorramshahi 1998, 1: 11). Previous research indicates that verses within each *rukū'* are bound by strong semantic and syntactic relations, contributing to the internal coherence of surahs. In fact, syntactic and semantic examinations reveal that virtually no sentence in the Qur'an is disconnected from its preceding context (Amin Najee & Fazel 2021).

Despite this, *rukū'* markers have been omitted from most Qur'anic codices printed in recent centuries, although they remain prevalent in Indian and Pakistani editions (Moradi Zanjani & Lesani Fesharaki 2015). This neglect intensified following the publication of the *Amīrī Muṣḥaf* in Egypt, which later became a widely recognized model for Qur'anic printing across the Muslim world (Lesani Fesharaki & Moradi Zanjani 2015). Consequently, most printed Qur'ans in the Islamic Republic of Iran lack

rukū' markers. Observations indicate that Indian and Pakistani codices continue to preserve these signs more consistently (Rafei Majoomerd et al. 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the tenth *rukū'* of Surah al-Naḥl, highlighting the significance of *rukū'*-based readings and evaluating the interpretive shortcomings that result from neglecting this division in exegetical works. It further seeks to demonstrate the methodological advantages of this approach in comparison with conventional exegetical frameworks. The tenth *rukū'*—among the sixteen *rukū'*s of the surah—has been selected as a representative example for implementing this approach. It should be noted that this *rukū'* exhibits a more complex structure than the other *rukū'*s in the surah, and it has elicited a variety of interpretations. Therefore, the impact of treating *rukū'* as a unit of meaning, versus neglecting this issue, can be evaluated across different exegeses. Accordingly, this article addresses the following research questions: How can reading *rukū'* as an independent semantic unit (or paragraph) reveal new layers of meaning in the Qur'an? What differences emerge in the semantic interpretation of verses when comparing exegetical *sīyāq* (textual context) divisions with *rukū'* divisions? What are the most significant interpretive challenges arising from the neglect of semantic units in Qur'anic surahs?

2. Literature Review

Al-Sindi (2016) investigated the origins of *rukū'* divisions and scholarly debates surrounding them, while also comparing the positions attributed to al-Bukhārī and others. Zarezardini (2016) sought to effect a shift in the unit of order — from verses to suras, from the simple to the complex, and from lexical and semantic units to text-fragments. To this end, the arrangement of verses within the *rukū'* divisions of Surah Yā-Sīn was examined. The findings indicate that the three themes of *tawḥīd* (divine unity), *ma'ād* (resurrection), and *risālah* (prophethood) are self-similar in this surah that is, they are embodied both in the surah's overall structure and in its finer details and that the surah's internal order is complex.

Zarezardini et al. (2019) identified distinct discourse patterns within the *rukū'* divisions. Their findings suggest that this approach can be extended to other surahs as well, potentially revealing even more complex patterns. Furthermore, Zarezardini et al. (2021) employed rhetorical analysis to demonstrate the surah's symmetrical and chiasmic structures based on *rukū'* boundaries. Sadeghi Turanposhti et al. (2021) examined the historical origins of *rukū'* divisions and their functional role in Islamic pedagogy,

emphasizing their connection with textual paragraphing. Iqbal (n.d.), in his Urdu work *Summary of the Qur'an: Rukū' by Rukū'*, analyzed the Qur'an entirely through its *rukū'* divisions, thereby providing an accessible thematic outline of the scripture.

Alshammeri et al. (2021a) demonstrated that paragraph embeddings can effectively analyze the semantic structure of verses and extract their thematic relations. Using the k-means algorithm, they clustered verses into thematic groups, thereby mapping semantic interconnections across the text. In another study, Alshammeri et al. (2021b) examined pairwise semantic relationships among verses through modern natural language processing (NLP) techniques. Their findings indicated that 3,079 verse pairs are semantically related. Nevertheless, while valuable, this method fails to capture the overarching purpose pursued by an entire surah.

Building on this body of research, the present study offers a novel perspective by reinterpreting *rukū'* divisions as independent semantic units. It aims to uncover the latent interpretive levels within the Qur'an and to assess the interpretive benefits of this approach. Employing a descriptive-analytical methodology, the study first analyzes the tenth *rukū'* of Surah al-Naḥl, identifying its internal coherence and thematic unity, and then compares its findings with exegetical categorizations in order to highlight the advantages of a *rukū'*-based approach over other interpretive methods.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a theoretical framework that brings together traditional Qur'anic scholarship and modern textual analysis. By examining *rukū'* alongside the concepts of the semantic unit and the paragraph, it establishes a basis for viewing Qur'anic divisions as coherent and autonomous textual segments. The following subsections outline these concepts as the foundation of the proposed interpretive model.

3.1. *Rukū'*

The term *rukū'* in its lexical sense means “to bend” or “to lower one’s head” (Qorashi 1992, 3: 120), and it also refers to bowing in prayer (al-Jawharī 1990, 4: 275). Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (1991, 1: 20) states that *rukū'* denotes “bending,” which may appear in the posture of prayer or in the sense of humility and submission. This humility may occur in worship or in contexts other than worship.

In Qur'anic studies, *rukū'* represents one of the earliest technical terms

used to indicate a type of textual division and demarcation of units within surahs. The earliest use of the term *rukū'* to designate a portion of Qur'anic verses is found in a narrative attributed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It states: "If the son of Adam were to possess two valleys of gold, he would desire a third; nothing fills the belly of the son of Adam except dust. Yet God accepts the repentance of those who repent. It was said that this was among what was once recited in the Qur'an in Surah Yūnus in the second or third *rukū'*, but its recitation was later abrogated while the narration remained" (al-Shaybānī 1979, 1: 61).

The mention of *rukū'āt* (plural of *rukū'*) can also be traced back to the 10th century CE, when during the nightly supererogatory prayers (*nawāfil*) of Ramaḍān, portions of the Qur'an were recited after *Fātiḥah al-Kitāb*. Gradually, the significance and application of *rukū'āt* increased, and this division came to be included in the margins of some Qur'anic codices (Sadeghi Turanposhti et al. 2021). Some studies trace the origin of this division back to the Prophet Muhammad himself, since he would recite portions of the Qur'an after al-Fātiḥah in the first and second *rak'ah* of prayer and then proceed to bowing (*rukū'*). Based on this practice, the Qur'an has been divided into 555 thematic units (Zarezardini et al. 2019). From early times, this division was commonly known as Qur'anic *rukū'āt*. In many Qur'anic manuscripts, the symbol *'ayn*, indicating *rukū'*, was inscribed at the end of each section (Rezai Isfahani et al. 2010), placed above the last word of the final verse of the section (Roohbakhsh 2010). Each section consists of several verses that are thematically and semantically interconnected (Akbari 2008, 69).

In other words, among the various Qur'anic divisions, *rukū'* is distinctive in that—unlike other subdivisions—it does not follow equal or fixed lengths. Rather, each *rukū'* comprises a cluster of verses, usually organized around a unifying theme (Rezai Isfahani et al. 2006). In fact, each *rukū'* within the Qur'an illustrates a particular issue within its surah, and *rukū'āt* are more frequently found in the longer surahs (Roohbakhsh 2010). Accordingly, the division of the Qur'an into *rukū'āt* can be considered a form of thematic or content-based segmentation.

As for the number of *rukū'āt*, scholarly opinions vary. The prevalent view cites 540 units (al-Sarakhsī 1988; Rezai Isfahani et al. 2012). Others, however, have proposed 556 units, corresponding to Indian printed Qur'anic editions (Mostafid & Dolati 2005). Modir Shanechi (1983), based on the 1857 edition derived from the Leipzig print prepared by Jafar Tehrani, reported 584 *rukū'āt*. Muḥammad Ṣabbāgh, by contrast, estimated the number at 730 (Mostafid & Dolati 2005). For the purposes of this study, the

working basis is the division into 555 *rukū'* units. According to this system, Surah al-Naḥl comprises 16 *rukū'āt*.

3.2. *Semantic Unit*

the concept of the semantic unit has been examined from both dimensions of language study, namely *langue* and *parole* (Chandler 2004; Safavi 2004). what is meant in the present discussion by semantic unit is its manifestation in language as *parole* (speech/discourse). Sasani (2010) argues that the purpose of the semantic unit is to identify where meaning is produced, reproduced, interpreted, and understood. From Sasani's perspective, the semantic unit is the text. He defines text as anything that, in a specific spatiotemporal context, is presented as a unit within a communicative process—whether face-to-face and present, or indirect and absent—and, on the other hand, as anything that, whether synchronously or asynchronously, or in the same or different spatial contexts, is read and understood. In discussions of signification and semiotics, the issue of semantic unit is also addressed with different and more holistic terminology as cultural unit (Eco 2018).

One of the benefits of identifying and understanding semantic units in the Qur'an is the possibility of uncovering its interpretive levels which is also a theme in semiotic scholarship. It is possible to take a specified approach to the interpretive levels of the Qur'an, namely, through identifying its semantic units in their entirety rather than from a fragmentary perspective. In this way, sometimes the entire text can be regarded as a single semantic unit, although this text may also contain smaller semantic units within its structure. In other words, while the entire text possesses semantic autonomy, coherence, and completeness, the internal units themselves also exhibit a degree of independence. These layers are not contradictory but rather provide new semantic dimensions for understanding the Qur'an. Whether a text possesses only one interpretive level or multiple levels, and how these levels interrelate, are questions that can only be clarified through textual analysis.

3.3. *Paragraph as a Semantic Unit*

The modern theory of the paragraph was first developed by Aberdeen professor Alexander Bain in the 19th century. The term *paragraph* has Greek origins, derived from *para* (beside) and *graph* (writing). Initially, it was used as a textual marker, placed in the margin of the paragraph, to indicate a significant pause in the continuity of discourse (Rodgers 1966).

A paragraph is an informational unit built around a specific idea, referred to as the “main idea.” An effective paragraph is one in which the reader can correctly grasp the main idea through its construction and scope (Hurri 1981). Typically, a paragraph conveys an independent idea or a particular component of a broader concept (Šafranĵ et al. 2022). In other words, paragraphs constitute the body of the text. If the body of a text were likened to a chessboard, each square—black or white—would represent a paragraph (Babaei 2017). A paragraph is generally defined as a group of sentences that explain a single idea (concept, thought, or subject) and are distinguished from other paragraphs on a page by indentation or spacing (Šafranĵ et al. 2022). However, it should be noted that in applied linguistics, what is considered goes beyond the superficial structure of a paragraph. A written discourse functions as a medium through which the author’s ideas are expressed, and if it is effectively constructed, it conveys these ideas to the reader in a logical and coherent manner (Yu 2022). A paragraph essentially states a specific proposition of the text and subsequently supports or explains it (Šafranĵ et al. 2022).

In general, each paragraph should possess a degree of autonomy. The independence of any textual segment depends on the autonomy of its central idea. Therefore, a paragraph provides a limited explanation of a point in a few sentences. While it maintains a chain-like relation with other points, it nevertheless enjoys relative independence. It is thus not inaccurate to say that each paragraph is like a short, independent note or a sequence in a feature film (Babaei 2017).

Based on these discussions, numerous similarities may be observed between *rukū‘āt* and paragraphs. Both form the building blocks of a text, a written composition, or a *surah*. Both maintain meaningful interconnections while preserving semantic independence, and both generate a new paragraph or *rukū‘* upon a change in theme. To illustrate, the marker for a paragraph is indentation at the beginning of the text, while *rukū‘āt* are signaled by the symbol *‘ayn* placed at the end of the relevant verses. Accordingly, a structural model has been proposed for the ideal paragraph, and the study at hand applies this model to Qur’anic *rukū‘āt*. In this way, the inadequacies of exegetical verse sequencing may be identified.

3.4. *The Structure of the Paragraph*

Some scholars argue that paragraphs are cognitive templates that are not necessarily consciously constructed but are either innately embedded in the human mind or formed through imitation of others’ speech (Amini 2010). Contrary to this view, which claims that paragraphs do not follow specific

rules, others maintain that each paragraph begins with a topic sentence that presents an idea. The main idea is then coherently supported by subsequent sentences, and finally, the paragraph concludes with a reaffirmation of the topic sentence (Rahman 2022). Well-structured paragraphs generally consist of following components:

- Topic sentence: States a debatable claim.
- Supporting sentence: Provides evidence and proof for the claim.
- Analytical sentence: Explains how the claim has been substantiated and how the evidence supports it.
- Transitional sentence: Ensures smooth transitions between paragraphs, allowing the reader to logically follow and connect the text (Yaghubyan & Dalalyan 2023).
- Defining sentence (optional): Related to the topic sentence, this element introduces content that challenges or qualifies the central idea of the paragraph, thereby limiting the scope of the topic sentence (Soltani 2017).

Every sentence in a paragraph should contribute additional information to develop the main idea until it is fully clarified. A well-constructed paragraph, like a well-written story, should have a beginning, a middle, and an end (Hurri 1981). The core of each paragraph lies in its central idea, which usually appears in the first sentence, while the subsequent sentences elaborate upon it. It is recommended that at the end of each paragraph, a sentence summarizing and concluding the discussion be included (Amini 2010). An effective conclusion ensures that the reader has comprehended the content fully and, at the same time, is motivated to read the next paragraph in pursuit of answers to new questions that may have arisen.

The topic sentence partly determines the internal relations of the paragraph and may, therefore, contain the most crucial information. In other words, the topic sentence usually provides a brief overview of the paragraph's content and prepares the reader for what follows (Yu, 2022). Research in European languages even suggests that the tone of a paragraph's opening sentence is often significantly distinct from that of subsequent sentences (Amini 2010). This structure, which applies to standard paragraphs, can also be observed in Qur'anic *rukū'āt*. Recognizing and employing these semantic units in Qur'anic exegesis facilitates comprehension of a surah's content and unveils many of its hidden dimensions.

4. Applying the Structure of a Standard Paragraph to the Tenth Rukū' of Surah al-Naḥl (Q. 16:71–76)

Before rereading the *rukū'* as a paragraph, an explanatory note is warranted to enhance comprehension of its content. One undeniable social reality is the variance among humans in benefiting from God's blessings. Some people enjoy blessings such as health and wealth, while others do not. It may be construed by readers that those who are more advantaged are closer to God, and that God has extended such mercy to them. Alternatively, it may raise the question in readers' minds whether those who are more privileged possess greater potential for closer proximity to God, suggesting that they can advance toward divine nearness through acts such as charity or by benefiting from health, and so forth, whereas such opportunities do not exist for the poor, destitute, or infirm. Another potential pitfall is that some groups might pursue greater livelihood and blessings through improper means. Additionally, this topic may sow doubts about God's justice in the minds of readers. Hence, with this preface, we proceed to the reading of the *rukū'*.

The tenth *rukū'* of Surah al-Naḥl offers a correct elucidation of the issue of disparities in the reception of blessings, and it seeks to dispel doubts and mitigate the harms associated with this issue in human life. If the structure of a standard paragraph is applied to the tenth *rukū'* of this surah, the following organization will emerge (Figure 1):

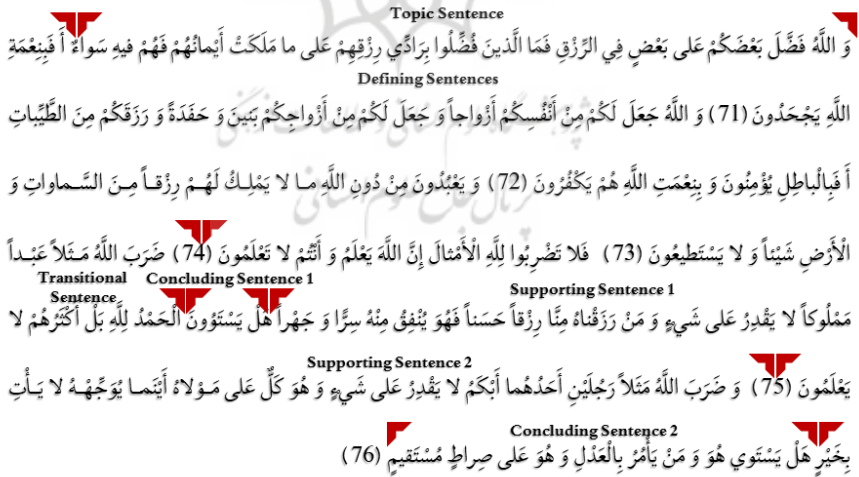


Figure 1. Applying the structure of a standard paragraph to the tenth *rukū'* of Surah al-Naḥl (Q. 16:71–76)

Topic Sentence: Verse 71 functions as the topic sentence of this semantic unit:

وَاللَّهُ فَضَّلَ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ فِي الرِّزْقِ فَمَا الَّذِينَ فُضِّلُوا بِرَادِّي رِزْقِهِمْ عَلَى مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ فَهُمْ فِيهِ سَوَاءٌ
... (النحل/71)

Allah has granted some of you an advantage over others in [respect of] provision. Those who have been granted an advantage do not give over their provision to their slaves so that they become equal in its respect... (Q. 16:71)

This verse aptly prepares the reader's mind to address an age-old question that has preoccupied human society: the wisdom behind the disparity in provision (*rizq*) among people. In other words, the verse clearly indicates that this *rukū'* will discuss the rationale behind differences in sustenance. Moreover, the verse itself points to one of the reasons for such disparities while simultaneously rebuking humans for criticizing God, despite their own failure to share and give charity to the needy—an act that perpetuates inequality in society.

Defining Sentences: The latter part of verse 71 to the end of verse 74 constitutes the defining sentences of this *rukū'*:

... أَفَنِينَعَمَةَ اللّٰهِ يَجْحَدُونَ (النحل/71) وَاللّٰهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ بَنِينَ وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ وَبِنِعْمَتِ اللّٰهِ هُمْ يَكْفُرُونَ (النحل/72) وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللّٰهِ مَا لَا يَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ رِزْقًا مِنَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ (النحل/73) فَلَا تَضْرِبُوا لِلّٰهِ الْأَمْثَالَ إِنَّ اللّٰهَ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ (النحل/74)

... What, will they dispute the blessing of Allah? (Q. 16:71) Allah made for you mates from your own selves and appointed for you, from your mates, children and grandchildren, and We provided you with all the good things. What, will they believe in falsehood while they deny the blessing of Allah? (Q. 16:72) They worship besides Allah what has no power to provide them with anything from the heavens and the earth, nor are they capable[of doing that] (Q. 16:73). So do not draw comparisons for Allah: indeed Allah knows and you do not know (Q. 16:74).

In the phrase “...What, will they dispute the blessing of Allah? (Q. 16:71),” God reproaches humans for not striving to cultivate a culture of social equality. At the same time, by condemning miserliness and narrow-mindedness, the verse encourages generosity and mutual support, equating failure to help others with ingratitude toward divine blessings. Verse 72 continues this admonition by censuring the disbelievers and ingrates, questioning why—despite blessings such as spouses from among their own kind, children and grandchildren, and every form of pure material and spiritual sustenance—they still pursue falsehood and futile endeavors,

choosing instead to adopt ingratitude. In other words, verse 72, as a defining sentence, draws attention to the fact that comparing human livelihoods and dwelling excessively on differences in provision leads to ingratitude and disbelief.

Verse 73 further addresses another consequence of this mindset: turning toward superstitions and worshipping entities that neither possess anything in the realm of existence nor have the power to increase people's sustenance. This verse, therefore, also censures those who, as in verse 71, found fault with God. Notably, both verses 71 and 72 use the expression *ni'mat Allāh* (blessing of God) and stress that recognizing this divine blessing should not be denied nor transformed into disbelief. The central point here is that human possessions are divine blessings that must be used in accordance with God's commands. Put differently, whatever one currently possesses is a blessing from God and should not be attributed to oneself or others.

Supporting Sentences: Portions of verses 75 and 76 function as supporting sentences in this semantic unit, elaborating upon the theme through two illustrative examples:

صَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا عَبْدًا مَمْلُوكًا لَا يَقْدِرُ عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَمَنْ رَزَقْنَاهُ مِنَّا رِزْقًا حَسَنًا فَهُوَ يُنْفِقُ مِنْهُ سِرًّا وَجَهْرًا هَلْ يَسْتَوُونَ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ (النحل/ 75) وَصَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا رَجُلَيْنِ أَحَدُهُمَا أَبْكَمُ لَا يَقْدِرُ عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ كَلٌّ عَلَى مَوْلَاهُ أَيْنَمَا يُوَجِّههُ لَا يَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي هُوَ وَمَنْ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَهُوَ عَلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ (النحل/ 76).

Allah draws a parable: a chattel who has no power over anything, and one whom He have provided a goodly provision and who spends out of it secretly and openly. Are they equal? All praise belongs to Allah. But most of them do not know(Q. 16:75). Allah draws [another] parable: Two men, one of whom is dumb, having no power over anything and who is a liability to his master: wherever he directs him he does not bring any good. Is he equal to someone who enjoins justice and is[steady]on a straight path?(Q. 16:76)

These two verses introduce two parables. Verse 75 contrasts a slave who lacks any capacity with a free individual endowed with provision who is able to spend openly and privately to aid others. This parable appears to relate to the blessing of wealth and property. In verse 76, the second parable compares a mute man who is incapable of doing anything, burdensome to others and his master, and unable to produce any benefit, with a capable person who not only walks rightly himself but also enjoins justice upon others (table 1). This example appears to pertain to the blessings of health and dignity.

Table 1. Comparison of wealth and power versus weakness and deprivation in supporting sentences of tenth rukū' of Surah al-Nahl

| Verses | Negative Example (Incapable/Deprived) | Positive Example (Capable/Endowed) |
|----------|---|---|
| Verse 75 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A slave who does not even own himself • Incapable of accomplishing anything | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A free man endowed with abundant wealth • Spends his wealth both openly and privately |
| Verse 76 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Mute man • Incapable of doing anything • A burden upon his master • Takes no positive step | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Strong and endowed man • Calls people to justice • Walks upon the straight path |

The central issue here lies in the meaning of the expression, Are they equal? (*hal yastawūn*). In this reading of the verses as a semantic unit, the meaning is that God's expectations and obligations from each of these two categories of people are not the same; rather, each person is charged with duties in proportion to his capacity and the blessings granted to him. Moreover, this *rukū'* indicates that those who possess greater wealth are required to employ it in establishing an atmosphere of justice. The overarching theme of this *rukū'* is the correct comprehension of the phenomenon of disparities in human endowments. It emphasizes that none but God has instituted this differentiation (*tafḍīl*) among people—thus one must not turn to others for the expansion of provision. The passage proceeds to call upon the wealthy and powerful to practice charity and solidarity, to view their possessions as blessings of God, to understand the rationale behind differences in provision and status, and to recognize that obligations are assigned according to one's share of blessings or deprivation thereof.

The concluding parts of verses 75 and 76 serve as the summative statements of the supporting sentences, clarifying the purpose of this semantic unit. Verse 75 affirms that God's expectations of a slave in bondage are not the same as those of a free man who possesses the capacity to give charity, and that individuals will be held accountable and tested in accordance with the blessings bestowed upon them. Thus, abundance of blessing increases one's duty and responsibility toward oneself, others, and God. Similarly, verse 76 reiterates that God's expectations of a mute man who brings no benefit are not the same as those of a capable individual who is obeyed by others, calls them to justice, and himself walks the straight path. Divine expectation, responsibility, trial, and obligation are thus contingent upon the degree of blessing one has received.

5. Comparison of the *Rukū'*-based interpretation with the Thematic Classifications of Commentators

As previously noted, the tenth *rukū'* constitutes an independent semantic unit, complete in both content and structure, fully conveying meaning and message to the audience. It should be emphasized that disregarding either the topic sentences or the concluding sentences, fragmenting the paragraph, or juxtaposing this semantic unit with adjacent *rukū'*s without recognizing its contentual independence results in interpretive flaws. Such flaws affect not only the understanding of the *rukū'* as a meaningful unit but also the broader purpose of the surah. These problems frequently appear in the structural segmentations of exegetes and produce interpretive distortions in the reading of the text.

In table 2, the thematic categorization of Qur'anic verses is traced from the exegetical works of both Sunni and Shia traditions. A general survey reveals that none of the exegetes have adopted a uniform method in their divisions. Some divided the range of verses within a single *rukū'* into two or three distinct sections, while others combined verses from both preceding and subsequent *rukū'*s into their categorization.

Table 2. Comparison of the tenth *rukū'* of Surah al-Nahl with the thematic categorization of Qur'anic verses in Selected Exegeses

| Qur'anic Exegeses | Thematic Divisions of Verses | | |
|--|------------------------------|-------|-------|
| The 10th <i>Rukū'</i> of surah al-Nahl | 71–76 | | |
| Tafsīr al-Marāghī | 70–72 | 73–76 | |
| Tafsīr Anwār Dirakhshān | 64–77 | | |
| Al-Tafsīr al-Wasīl lil-Qur'ān al-Karīm | 70–72 | 73–76 | |
| Şafwah al-Tafsīr (al-Şābūnī) | 51–74 | 75–90 | |
| Tafsīr Min Hudā al-Qur'ān | 64–74 | 75–83 | |
| Tafsīr Nemūneh | 70–72 | 73–74 | 75–77 |
| Tafsīr Aḥsan al-Ḥadīth | 65–77 | | |

To highlight the consequences of disregarding the semantic unity of the *rukū'*, we examine three exegetical works that collectively exhibit all of these interpretive shortcomings. The resulting issues can be summarized as follows:

5.1. Fragmentation of Meaning, Divergence from the Primary Aim, and Reader Confusion

Al-Marāghī (1951, 14: 108) divides the verses comprising the tenth *rukū'* into two separate categories. He places verses 70–72 in one sequence and verses 73–76 in another. In this interpretation, the exegete begins his discussion from verse 73, where God rebukes idolaters for worshiping powerless idols incapable of exercising authority. Beginning the commentary with verse 73, however, results in a structural problem: the exegete introduces the discourse with a parable, although parables typically function as supporting sentences intended to confirm and illustrate a previously stated claim. Starting a paragraph or *sīyāq* with a parable leaves the reader disoriented in seeking the principal proposition, forcing them to return to the previous paragraph for context. Yet the very purpose of *rukū'*-division in the Qur'an is to establish meaningful and purposive subdivisions within a surah that, while semantically independent, maintain coherent interconnections across the surah.

After presenting a few verses, this commentary then proceeds to independent conclusions. For instance, under the verse Q 16:74, the exegete concludes: The outcome is that you must not assign similitudes to God, nor liken Him to His creatures, for there is no comparison between Him and them. Similarly, under the verse Q. 16:75, he concludes: The ultimate lesson is that complete praise belongs to God alone, sincerely and apart from the idols you invoke besides Him. They exercise no favor upon you, though you attribute praise to them. In truth, praise belongs solely to God. Yet most disbelievers do not know this, and for that reason they associate others with Him in worship (al-Marāghī 1951, 14: 114).

It may be suggested that these piecemeal conclusions are a compensatory device, because the semantic coherence was broken by unsuitable delimitation of the textual unit, the exegete seeks to patch the discourse by introducing separate conclusions. However, this approach undermines the Qur'an's intent of engaging readers in reflection and guiding them toward the intended divine message. Moreover, according to the topic sentence and defining statements in verses 71–74, the true purpose of the two parables is to demonstrate the futility of overemphasizing disparities in provision, and to establish that whenever God grants someone greater blessings, He correspondingly imposes greater duties and responsibilities upon them.

On the other hand, this commentary does end the semantic unit appropriately, closing the paragraph with verse 76, which mirrors the final verse of the tenth *rukū'*. It correctly concludes that the superior figure in

both parables is the One God, the All-Powerful, who summons His servants to monotheism and obedience, and who, by His command of justice, neither deviates from truth nor ever will (al-Marāghī 1951, 14: 117).

5.2. *The Breakdown of Semantic Coherence and the Disruption of Discursive Relations*

In the *al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ lil-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Tantawi (1997, 8: 192) presents the tenth *rukū'* section of this surah in two separate thematic contexts. He treats verses 70–72 as one context and verses 73–76 as another. Although this tafsīr identifies the beginning of the thematic unit as verse 73, it introduces verse 72 as a prelude to the discussion. It frames the manifest blessings of God and the ignorance of the polytheists as a preliminary to the discourse of this unit. This indicates that the exegete himself recognized that the introductory elements of the discourse belong to the previous *sīyāq*. Therefore, to avoid disrupting the coherence of the argument, he referred back to verse 72. Accordingly, it would have been more appropriate for the exegete to avoid fragmenting the *rukū'* division in order to preserve the semantic and discursive connections between the verses.

In fact, the verse *Q. 16: 73* is causally linked to verse 71. The underlying reason for people's turn to idolatry and associating partners with God lies in their incorrect perspective on worldly blessings. This perspective is articulated in verse 71, where the origin of human disparity in sustenance and provision is mistakenly attributed to divine injustice and discriminatory treatment of His servants—an idea that is refuted in verse 73. God presents such disparity as part of His wise plan and forbids attributing inappropriate comparisons and qualities to Him. He further identifies human ignorance and lack of understanding as the source of such erroneous beliefs and attitudes. Tantawi explains that just as people offer examples for others, they should not do so for God, because it is He who knows how to present examples, while they do not. He also draws on al-Zajjāj's interpretation, which notes that the polytheists believed God was too exalted to be worshipped directly, and thus deemed it necessary to turn to idols. It is worth noting that Tantawi himself does not offer any substantial elaboration on the nature of this parable or on the reason for its prohibition. Had he considered verse 71 as part of the same *sīyāq* and as a conceptual prelude to this semantic unit, he would have been better able to explain the interrelations among the verses.

Tantawi concludes his *sīyāq* at verse 76, summarizing the argument by stating that God, in this unit, has illustrated the stark difference between

Himself and the false deities worshipped by the misguided through two parables. These two parables, he asserts, constitute the most compelling evidence of God's superiority. Finally, the exegete mentions the link between this *rukū'* and the following one, emphasizing that God—being the One true deity—possesses encompassing knowledge and power, and that the next *rukū'* points to the comprehensiveness of His might and the vastness of His knowledge.

5.3. *The Intermingling of Themes*

The *Aḥsan al-Ḥadīth* exegesis considers the limited scope of verses 65 to 77 as a single thematic unit (Qorashi 1996, 5: 461). In fact, the exegete treats the ninth and tenth *rukū'* of this surah as one semantic unit and interprets it accordingly. He begins the thematic unit with theological discussions, and attributes the reason for such discussions in this surah to the global inclination of people toward idolatry and their attention to beings other than God. Before commencing the discussion, this exegesis offers a summary conclusion of the verses grouped within the thematic unit. The exegete, before starting the analysis of verses 65–77, states that the conclusion is that the creation and management of the world are in God's hands. Honor and disgrace, benefit and harm, all lie with Him; therefore, He alone must be worshipped, and those who worship any being other than Him are in error and misguidance. It seems that, due to the diversity and multiplicity of topics within this kind of thematic grouping, the exegete presents the conclusion at the beginning so that the reader does not become confused and can understand the overall objective of the discourse.

It is worth noting that one of the essential principles in any paragraph or semantic unit is thematic coherence and content harmony. In fact, each paragraph aims to convey a specific point or topic, and writers use multiple paragraphs to discuss different themes. Observing this principle helps the reader fully grasp the speaker's intent while reading a semantic unit. Conversely, presenting multiple themes within a single unit leads to confusion and loss of focus for the reader. In this *sīyāq*, too, the exegete addresses three different topics within a single thematic unit. He begins with *tawḥīd*, then proceeds to affirm the incomparability of God and deny the legitimacy of other deities, and finally concludes with a verse demonstrating God's power to establish the Resurrection and affirming that the unseen knowledge of the heavens belongs to Him alone. This improper delimitation likely compelled the exegete to extract conclusions from each verse individually, so that the reader may grasp the intended meaning of each verse and, by assembling them, arrive at an overall conclusion—which, given the incorrect thematic grouping and poorly defined start and end

points, remains rather difficult.

It is important to mention that, unlike *al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ*, this exegesis does not separate verses 71 and 72 from verse 73. Therefore, it succeeds in accurately analyzing verse 73 in relation to the preceding verses and reaches appropriate conclusions. Regarding the relationship between these three verses, the exegete states that verse 73 is the outcome of verses 71 and 72, because if people pay attention to what has been said, they will realize that their deities had no role in the mentioned blessings. Nonetheless, some continue to worship and turn to them. Essentially, verse 71 illustrates that those who are favored in terms of sustenance are not giving to their slaves from their own provision, but rather from what God has provided; thus, in terms of sustenance, they and their slaves are equal. Verse 72 affirms that spouses, children, descendants, and all pure blessings are from God alone. Therefore, in verse 73, God reproaches the polytheists, declaring all these blessings to be from Himself—not from the deities they associated with Him.

Finally, after establishing God's superiority over idols in verse 76, the exegete transitions to the subject of the Hereafter as one instance of *ghayb al-samāwāt wa al-ard*, which he considers exclusive to God. The realization of the Day of Resurrection is not difficult for God; rather, it is as effortless as the blink of an eye. Overall, the inclusion of this verse alongside those affirming God's superiority seems slightly inconsistent and causes thematic fragmentation within the unit. Hence, the reader, who at the end of a semantic unit expects to reach a definitive conclusion, is suddenly confronted with the new topic of Resurrection, which bears no clear connection to the preceding discussions. The verse concerning the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment neither affirms nor denies God's *tawhīd* or the parables proving His superiority. Therefore, placing it at the end of this *sīyāq* is improper, and it would have been more appropriate to introduce it as the opening statement of the subsequent thematic unit.

6. Conclusion

Verses 71 to 76 of Surah al-Naḥl may be considered, from the perspective of a semantic unit, as an integrated whole and counted as an independent *rukū'*. In other words, this passage of Qur'anic verses can, to a large extent, be regarded structurally and thematically as a paragraph within a written text and read as a single unit of meaning. Therefore, attention to such a division of Qur'anic verses is of significant importance, and neglecting it results in various problems in the understanding of the surah's content.

In this study, in addition to offering an interpretation based on this approach—by identifying the topic sentence, delimiting markers, two supporting sentences, a transitional sentence, and two concluding statements—the exegetical performance of three commentators was also critically examined. This review revealed that many exegetes have overlooked the importance and necessity of *rukū'* division in interpreting the surahs of the Qur'an. Each has adopted a different thematic segmentation, which in turn has caused interpretive difficulties for the reader. Major and noteworthy problems that arise from disregarding *rukū'*s and adopting diverse thematic segmentations among exegetes in the comprehension of Qur'anic surahs are neglecting the proper opening and closure of the discourse and fragmentation of semantic coherence. Some exegetes, in their segmentation, failed to include the initial verses of a semantic unit, resulting in the disconnection of the main sentence from the core message. This, in turn, led to the breakdown of discursive relations and a departure from the surah's central objective. It is worth noting that a similar issue arises in cases where the closing of a discourse is disregarded—when a verse from the beginning of the next *rukū'* is added to the end of the current one—causing comprehension problems for the reader.

Conversely, other exegetes have, in their segmentation, treated multiple *rukū'*s as one thematic unit, or divided a single *rukū'* into several separate *sīyāqs*, which has likewise resulted in the disruption of the semantic unity. This approach has led to issues such as straying from the main objective, reader confusion, thematic intermingling, and presenting the verses as if they were aimless or disconnected. Therefore, it can be said that reading and analyzing the content of a surah in light of its *rukū'*s and the structure that governs them may reveal a new interpretive levels within the Qur'an. However, the interconnection between *rukū'*s should not be overlooked; rather, it is essential to identify and utilize these connections in order to arrive at the surah's central objective and to organize the remaining themes across the *rukū'*s accordingly.

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