

The opening of *Surah Al-Baqara*

by Zahid Aziz¹

“This Book, there is no doubt in it, is a guide to those who keep their duty.”

— 2 : 2

The first chapter of the Holy Quran, the *Sura Fatiha*, contains the prayer: “Guide us on the right path”. The second chapter, entitled *Al-Baqara*, meaning ‘The Cow’, begins by telling us that the Quran is the book that will guide us. Thus it is a very logical opening and apt beginning for the second chapter. Even without linking it with the prayer “guide us on the right path”, it is a very logical opening for it tells the reader what the purpose of the book is, which is to guide people. This refutes the common objection raised against the Quran that it has no organised arrangement. It is a most fitting beginning to a book, after its ‘preface’, for it to open with the statement: “This Book...”.

Title The Cow

What is the significance of the title of this chapter *The Cow*? Why is the cow so important that the 2nd chapter of the Quran, its longest chapter, which starts so near to the commencement of the book, is called by this title?

This name is said to refer to the incident in its verses 67–71, in which the Israelites were told by Moses to sacrifice a certain cow but they were hesitant and reluctant to obey this command. They only sacrificed the cow after trying to avoid it by claiming they could not identify which cow was meant. The reason they were told to sacrifice it was that they had started to worship it. Cow worship was prevalent in many cultures and religions at the time. Most famously, it is in the Hindu religion that the cow is regarded as sacred.

The reason for cow worship was that this animal played a central role in the establishment of human civilization. When human beings settled down on the land and formed habitations and cities, the cow or bull fulfilled their crucial needs. It gave them milk, a vital part of diet, it ploughed the land so that food could be grown, it provided fuel by its dung, and its skin could be used to produce leather which, along with wood, formed the basis of much ancient technology. The cow was absolutely

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indispensable to the physical life of people living in a settled, civilized society. This is why it came to be revered.

The cow is a symbol of the fulfilment of the physical and material needs of civilized man. The Quran relates that a king of Egypt saw in a dream that seven lean cows ate seven fat cows (and he saw also seven green ears and seven dry ones). The prophet Joseph, on being called to interpret this dream, said that the seven fat cows represented seven years of good harvest and the seven lean cows represented seven years of famine. They should store surplus food in the seven good years, to be consumed in the seven lean years. See 12 : 43–49. The cow was a symbol of material prosperity.

By giving this important chapter the title *The Cow*, the Quran is conveying the message that just as man needed the cow for his physical needs in his civilized state, similarly he needs spiritual and moral guidance given by revelation in order to live in that civil society. In settled societies, people had to deal with each other in many different, complex ways, much more so than when human beings lived as nomads and hunters in caves or forests previously. For this, they required increasingly advanced guidance, as given by the Quran.

By mentioning the incident about the Israelites being required to sacrifice a cow, and their hesitation and vacillation, the Quran teaches us not to worship the things that we need for the satisfaction of our material needs of this world, and that we must be prepared to sacrifice them from time to time to avoid becoming so attached to them that they rule us, rather than we ruling them. Hence the Quran says in the same chapter that while some people pray “Our Lord, give us (things) in this world” (2 : 200), what people should pray for is as follows:

“Our Lord, grant us good in this world and good in the Hereafter, and save us from the punishment of the fire” (2 : 201).

The cow is the symbol of “good in this world”. But man also requires “good in the Hereafter”, i.e. his moral and spiritual good, which is supplied by the Holy Quran.

“This Book, there is no doubt in it”

Turning to the verse quoted at the beginning, the Holy Quran is the only scripture that speaks of itself as a book, introduces itself, and tells the reader much about itself as a book. Thus even just its two words “This Book” show the uniqueness of the Quran among all world scriptures.

The word translated as ‘this’ is *dhālika* which literally means ‘that’ (something remote) rather than ‘this’ (something near). However, it is also used instead of ‘this’ when speaking of something which is honoured. It indicates that the Quran will be greatly honoured and held in high estimation.

As to the statement that “there is no doubt in it”, one meaning of it is that it leaves no doubt about what it claims to be. A person might not accept its claims but no one can be in any doubt as to what its claims are. The Quran tells us that it is revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad (47 : 2), its name is the Quran (15 : 1), its revelation began in the month of Ramadan (2 : 185), it is in Arabic (12 : 2, 20 : 113), it was revealed to the Holy Prophet’s heart through the angel Gabriel (26 : 192–195), it was revealed gradually, not all at once (25 : 32, 75 : 16), it has scribes (80 : 11–16), it will be collected in book form according to the will of God (75 : 17). It tells us how it should be read (73 : 4), when it should be read (17 : 78), how it should be listened to (7 : 204), and how it should be interpreted (3 : 7, 4 : 82). (Note that the references given here are only to some selected verses. There are other verses that can be cited in support of these statements.)

In each one of these characteristics the Quran is unique among world scriptures. Questions have been raised regarding other scriptures, as to what they are, whether they are revelations or human writings, who composed them in book form and when, what was their original language, etc. These questions create *doubts* about these books, but no such doubts exist about the Quran. As to the content of the Quran, no one has any doubt, not even the most hostile critics of Islam, that it came from the lips of the Prophet Muhammad.

“Guide to those who keep their duty”

The word for “those who keep their duty” is *muttaqīn* (singular: *muttaqī*). It may be considered equivalent to God fearing, pious, or righteous. In this connection two related questions are often asked. Firstly, Does this mean that the Quran is *only* a guide for the very pious, and not for the ordinary person who is a sinner? Secondly, if someone is already pious and righteous, why does he need the guidance of the Quran? It is argued that the words of this verse seem to suggest that the Quran cannot guide those who actually need guidance, but is a guide for those who are already guided!

The answer is that in the word *muttaqīn* the Quran is including those who wish to find guidance, however low or high a degree of piety they may possess. Being a *muttaqī* is a matter of degree. It is not the case that a person is either a *muttaqī* or

he is not. The Quran has here dignified all those who have the sincere desire to be guided, even they may be ordinary sinners, by calling them *what they wish to become*, that is, God fearing or righteous.

Christian preachers are often declaring that they welcome sinners to join them, that Jesus came for sinners and not for the perfect, and that we are all sinners. No doubt the Quran provides guidance for sinners to lift them out of sin, but to keep on calling them as sinners is discouraging for them and it suggests that they can never rise above that level. So the Quran here is emphasizing the positive side of such people, by describing them as what they wish to become.

On the other hand, the word *muttaqīn* here also indicates that there is no end or limit to the stage of righteousness that a person may rise to, and however high someone may have risen the Quran will continue to be a guide to him for further progress. From the spiritual novice to the *wali* of the highest order, all have a path before them along which to advance, and the Quran provides them with the light and guidance to proceed along it. May Allah grant all of us the yearning, strength and opportunity to progress along this road, *amin!*

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