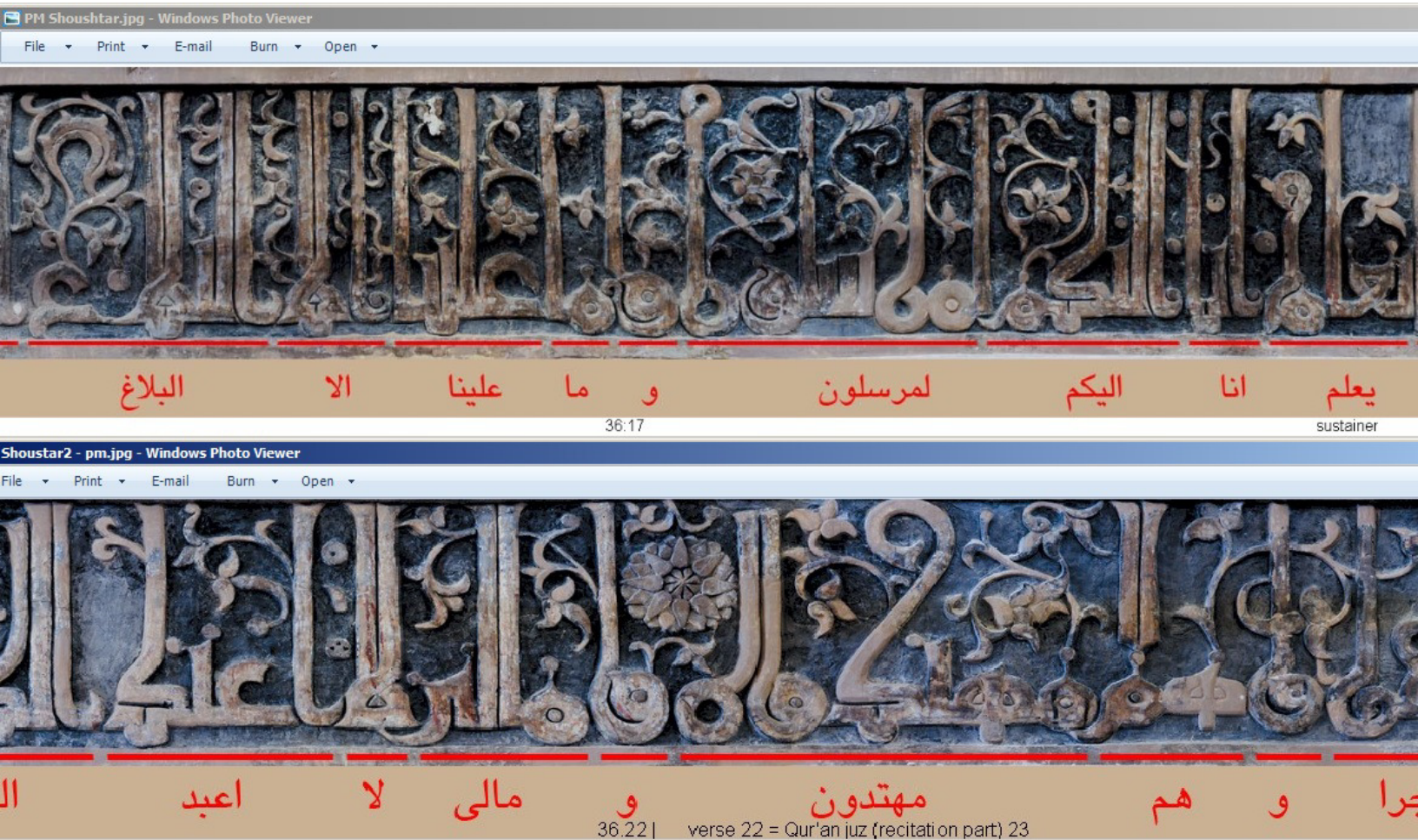
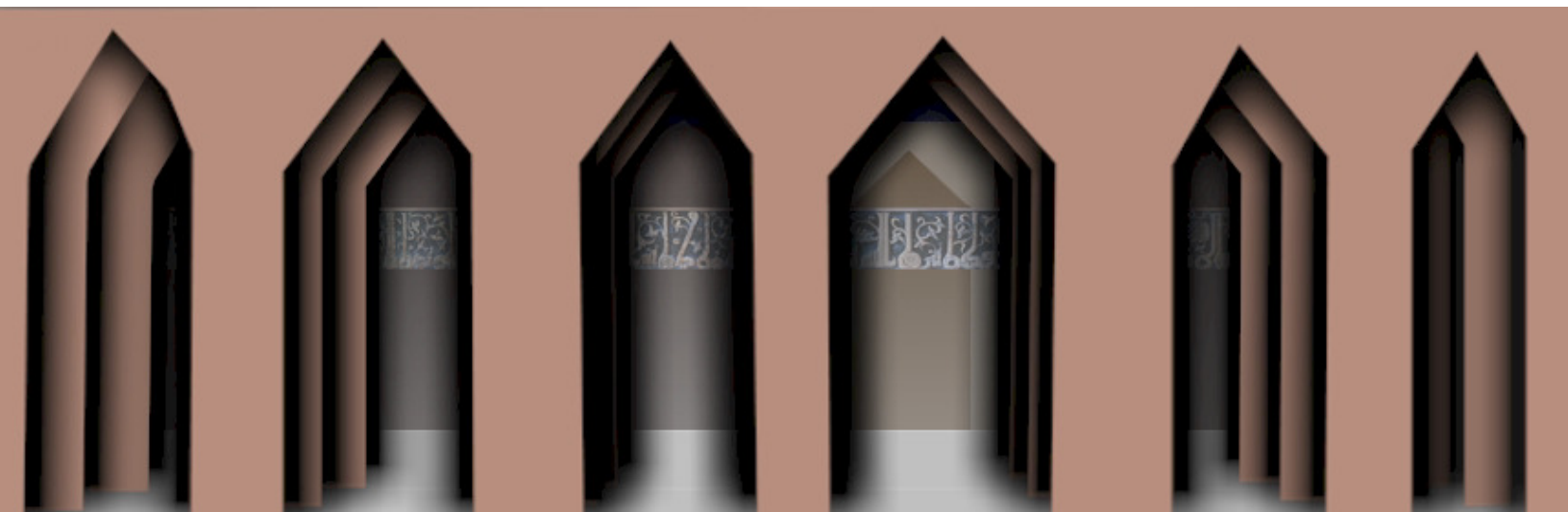


The Great Mosque at Shoushtar: The Prayer hall Frieze as *Barakah*

(below: details of the frieze)



(below, visibility study: the mosque is full of piers, the inscription runs around the wall)



Introduction

Set at about eye level, yet hidden from the casual gaze, the frieze runs along the *Qibla* wall¹, in a dark, narrow and lofty passageway as far from the natural light as possible and masked by five rows of substantial octagonal piers supporting steep vaults whose shells narrow the view and cut the light further still. Yet it is a beautiful thing, with a stately kufic script interwoven with delicate foliate and floral tendrils in high relief, its pale forms glowing faintly against a deep blue ground. It bears a section of surah 36, *Ya-Sin*, known as “the heart of the Qur’an”² because its text touches on all the themes of the Qur’an³. In a manner of speaking, therefore, the surah as a whole represents the entire Qur’an. And yet it must be a difficult thing to read, either by glimpsing sections between the piers or by standing in the close space of the *Qibla* aisle and squinting along a 40 meter wall. So it is a conundrum: a beautiful and important text whose sense and beauty are heavily veiled.

Mysterious as it is, the frieze may well be the “heart of the mosque” and to engage with it intellectually is an opportunity to observe and, if desired, to experience the beautiful outworking of a specifically Islamic ontology that sees the Qur’an as a transmitter of *barakah*, that insists on the potential of every human to know himself or herself as a *salik* – an ardent seeker traveling back to his or her origin in God – and to experience parts of that journey consciously. To undertake this, however, is to confront a perennial bone of contention between Muslim and western scholars that, if unexamined, effectively guarantees that they will not only misunderstand each other but will do so with disapproval. This, then, is where the investigation of the Shoushtar frieze must start⁴.

The issue is what falls within the scope of academic study and why. Traditional western and Islamic tenets about this are uncompromisingly opposed and until the structural nature of the disagreement is revealed, the necessarily secular and descriptive western academic is continually forced into a position of seeking to explain and validate the Islamic conviction that the Qur’an and hadiths are fundamental sources of truth and that visual and textual culture is always to be examined for what it can reveal of God and/or our spiritual nature. That is, one is forced to seek ever further for sources, influences and proofs of validity for the Qur’an itself and to touch on the hadiths as lightly as possible. Conversely the necessarily spiritual and self-examining Muslim has no way to show the western academic the incompleteness of an approach that insistently

¹ It will be seen that the design and dimensions of this mosque accord scrupulously with a range of Qur’anic directives. The alignment of the *Qibla* wall, which is perfect, is integral to this approach.

² According to a widely cited hadith, it was designated as such by the Prophet: *truly everything has a heart and the heart of the Qur’an is Ya-Sin; and whoever recited Ya-Sin, Allah shall record for him, because of that recitation, the recitation of the Qur’an ten times*. This hadith was cited by Al-Ghazali in his *kitāb Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* (Jewels of the Qur’an), cf Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Jewels of the Qur’ān, Al-Ghazālī’s Theory*, Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1977, 64. The hadith (and abbreviated variants of it) is attributed to several collections, including Al-Tirmidhi (209–279/324–892), *Al-Jami’ al-Kabir* (also called *Al-Sunan*), 2812/A, and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (164–241/780–855), *Musnad*, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1995, Vol V, 26.

³ Ayatullah Dastghaib Shirzai (qs) (Syed Athar Husain Rizvi, transl), *Heart of the Qur’an: a commentary to Sura al-Yasin*, Qum: Ansariyan Publications (foreword)

⁴ I am more than grateful to Dara O. Shayda for his generous support in providing and guiding me through extensive translations of historic primary source texts elucidated with his own knowledgeable and detailed commentary on the linguistic and spiritual implications. To avoid any error of mine being imputed to him, I emphasize that the summary that follows is my own synthesis of the understanding he made possible for me.

stops short of spiritual discovery nor that this baulking of the issue makes description, proof, and inference irrelevant. In studying the products of Islamic culture, recognizing the functional parameters of that worldview releases the western academic from the continuing need to avoid or explain the ontological use of the primary sources, which include especially the Qur'an and hadiths but also all products of humanity, including (but not limited to) art and letters. In light of the foundations of Islamic thought, and while it is applied to the products of Islamic culture, this use needs no further justification.

The acceptance of the Qur'an as the primary source of existential truth is a matter of historic choice made with a sound rationale usefully outlined by Al-Ghazali⁵. The choice concerns more than the narrative content of the Qur'an: it also concerns the relevance of the Qur'an as starting point and guide for all human endeavor, i.e., recognizing it as a fundamental validity, formative of the intellect and its mode of comprehending the universe and creating within it. Al-Ghazali pointed out that there are two basic approaches to truth. One is to seek it through the senses and intellect, and the other is to receive it directly from God – that is, *kashf* (divine revelation). In recognizing that sense and intellect are valid but halting and making his choice to find truth through *kashf* (which is fully comprehensive), Al-Ghazali fixed the Islamic system in the Qur'an⁶, which is the assiduously preserved *kashf* of the Prophet Muhammad. This constitutes the Qur'an as a base source of information about God and the universe⁷ from which certain conclusions are necessarily drawn.

Most essentially, the Qur'an provides that God created the universe with a spoken decision (this is reiterated seven times⁸), from which all else follows. The Qur'an also states the all-comprehensive nature of this creation: *La 'ilaha 'illa Allah*, there is no God but God (thus, necessarily, all of creation originates in a single common source and, closely related to this, the statement is also understood mystically as there is nothing but God)⁹. This is reiterated in precise form twice¹⁰ with 34 further slight variations¹¹, it is also repeated by Muslims at each of the five

⁵ Al-Ghazali (d.1111 AD) had a formative impact on Islam and Sufism because through his own high-level and wide-ranging knowledge along with his sustained experience of divine revelation he was able to articulate and integrate ideas that had been known in scattered and implicit and/or esoteric form before him. His position on the source(s) of truth is timeless and applies to the seeking of any period or any culture. His position makes clear that a choice is to be made. It is not a prescription.

⁶ cf Duncan B MacDonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory*, 1903, III: Theology: Chapter IV, 215–242. See also Ismail R al Faruqi, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, 300–301

⁷ The Prophet's *kashf* is also recorded in the *hadiths*, in which his answers to questions and other teaching activities were recorded for posterity by his *sahabi* (friends). Those *hadiths* whose reliability has been established through their chain of transmission carry an authority almost equal to the Qur'an and are thus almost equally valid sources of truth.

⁸ The decision is expressed in the word *kūn!* (Be!), see Q 2:117, 3:47, 6:73, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, 40:68. The Qur'an also contains many other kinds of statement of God's creation of the universe. Q 42:29, for example, is a direct statement with no reference to the spoken command that indicates deliberateness. Q 2:117 clearly connects the decision and the work as an expression of it.

⁹ Al-Ghazali emphasized this second understanding, which is fundamental to Sufism. Cf W Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 12 and note 10, which notes that the formula "there is nothing in *wujūd* but God" was used by al-Ghazali and has been traced back to Ma'rūf al-Karkhī, 2nd/8th century, see also Chittick, *Wahdat al-Wujud*, Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, 727.

¹⁰ Q 37:35, 47:19

¹¹ There are 27 iterations of the statement, *there is no God but He*: Q 2:163, 2:255, 3:2, 3:6, 3:18, 4:87, 6:102, 6:106, 7:158, 9:31, 9:129, 11:14, 20:8, 20:98, 23:116, 27:26, 28:70, 28:88, 35:3, 39:6, 40:3, 40:62, 40:65, 44:8, 59:22, 59:23, 64:13; there are 3 iterations of the more emphatic, *there is no God whatever but God*: 3:62, 5:73, 38:65; there

daily prayers, and by the muezzin at every call to prayer. These two deeply rooted and strongly stated principles – the singleness of God, and the all-comprehensiveness of his creation – are the basis of all further inferences about the nature of existence.

It follows, for example, that all creation is a form of projection from a single source that is not part of our experienced universe. To short-cut the complexities, which have been debated for nearly 1400 years, the necessary implication is that there is a “seed” universe (the Jabarut) from which God – alive and purposeful – sends out his word of creation, *kun!* (Be!) as reiterated in the Qur’an¹², as well as his eternal Attributes¹³ and designs for his creation that exist in a second non-physical universe (the Malakut, also called the Alam al-Mithal), from which they make their way into the physical universe that we inhabit (the Mulk)¹⁴.

It further follows that everything existing in our physical universe is an extension, or reflection, of an eternal, unchanging entity conceived in the Jabarut and first manifested in the Malakut. That is, this universe as a whole has an exactly corresponding “mirror” to which it is connected as integrally as to itself since every entity in this universe is connected by a thread of its own existence to a corresponding entity in the Malakut¹⁵ and thence to God. This connection is usefully termed a “prehension” (a tensile connection)¹⁶ and acts as a *majaz* (corridor)¹⁷ to its origin in God. Thus all existence in this physical universe (necessarily including the apparent products of humankind, like art and letters) proceeds from God and is a reflection of God, it borrows its (living) reality from God, and there is therefore nothing but God.

are 3 iterations of the statement, *there is no God but Me*: 16:2, 20:14, 21:25; and there is a single iteration of the statement, *there is no God but You*: 21:87.

¹² See note 8 for the references

¹³ That is, his Names, of which 99 are recorded in the Qur’an, 3,000 are known, and an infinite number more are understood by necessity, as they describe the infiniteness of God Himself.

¹⁴ There are many primary-source explanations of these interconnected universes. The earliest may be that of al-Makki (d. 385/996), known to us only as represented by al-Ghazali (449–504/1058–1111) (cf Kojiro Nakamura, “Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid (449–504/1058–1111)”, *Islamic Philosophy* Online, www.ghazali.org/articles/gz1.htm). An important development, began during the 12th century AD, with the work of the *Shaikh al-Ishraq*, Suhrawardī (549–586/1155–1191), who understood the Alam al-Mithal as the threshold of the Malakut rather than synonymous with it, cf Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London and New York: Kegan Paul International in association with Islamic Publications for the Institute of Ismaili Studies, c.1962, 214–5; and there is a slightly later exposition which introduces the metaphor of the Jabarut as “seed universe”, by ‘Aziz al-Din al-Nasafi (d. after 1292 AD), “Treatise 11”, *Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil* (translated online: www.untiredwithloving.org/jabarut_malakut_mulk.html, and cf Hermann Landolt, “Nasafi, ‘Aziz b. Muhammad (7th AH/13th CE century)”, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, online ed, July 2002).

¹⁵ Al-Ghazali used the word *mutabaqa* for this kind of correspondence, which allowed him to explain the true nature of the metaphor (*mithal*) in which the perceived result (*mathal*) has an essential continuity with its analogue in the Malakut (*mumaathila*). The mathal thus has the nature of a projection (*tajalli*), whether visual or verbal.

¹⁶ The term “prehension” was coined by Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

¹⁷ Like the word *mithal* (discussed above, note 15), *majaz* is typically translated with the word “metaphor”, in which a name or description is applied to something unrelated to its literal sense (a person described as a mouse or a dragon, for example), thus producing a striking expansion in awareness. But the literal inapplicability of the metaphor suggests a separation between the object and the metaphorical description, which conflicts with the necessary inference pointed out above that the entire universe is a projection from a single source, that is, fundamentally connected. Shayda explains that the word “majaz” is derived from the template (stem) *maf’al* (a place for traversing, to go beyond), in relation to which the verb *jāza*, means to travel through. *Majaz* is therefore more usefully understood as a “corridor”, i.e. a direct route to the origin. In his *Al-Itqan fi ‘Ulum il-Qur’an* (Perfection in Sciences of Qur’an), As-Suyuti invoked consensual opinion to defend the use of the majaz in the Qur’an as “further reaching [in time and space] than the haqiqa [literally true phrases]”.

To locate humanity within this, the Qur'an states that God taught Adam all the Names¹⁸, thus making Adam and his progeny alone able to comprehend, to contain within themselves, the universe which is the reflection of God, and thus Adam (and those alone of his progeny who achieve this comprehension) is fit to guard it and to be its vice-regent (*khalifa*)¹⁹. Therefore it is the purpose of Adam's progeny to seek to achieve this comprehension by contemplating the mirror that is the reflection of God in macrocosm (the universe) and microcosm (their inner being, that is their heart or *sirr* which receives this knowledge). This too is reiterated in the Qur'an on multiple occasions²⁰.

Thus in the final analysis, the Qur'an, which is to be understood as the origin-source of truth, states through its narrative and through the necessary inferences to be made from its narrative that all human endeavor is directed to a single purpose, to seek and to reflect the comprehension necessary to make us fit *khalifas*. This is achieved by contemplating the unity of God in his universe and in ourselves. It is to that end that all science, philosophy, creative expression are directed, and in that light that they (the Shoushtar frieze among them) should be examined.²¹

The Frieze: content and distribution

The frieze survives in several sections on the Qibla wall, including a short L-shaped stretch that outlined the north west corner of the original mihrab²². It is not clear how much of the enscription as a whole is missing, nor which other walls (if any) carried it, but it is clear that on the Qibla wall, at least, it ran in a single uninterrupted strip. The surviving text comprises two parts of the first *ruku'* (chapter section, plural *ruku'at*) and two parts of the second *ruku'* of surah 36. The passage evidently began at the north west corner of the Qibla wall at the start of verse 8 and ran continuously to the south east corner, where it ended exactly at the close of verse 23: that is exactly two half *ruku'at*²³, i.e., Q 36: 8–12 and 36:13–23.

If this represents the entire enscription, it seems a somewhat surprising selection in that it begins part way through the section concerning the disbelief of earlier generations. It may be, therefore, that the enscription originally included more of the surah and extended over more walls. In fact, if, as the hadith says²⁴, reciting the complete surah is accounted equivalent to ten recitations of the entire Qur'an, it is tempting to wonder if the enscription originally included the whole surah. Whether or not this was actually done, it would have been logistically possible (fig 1). If laid out

¹⁸ Q 2:31, but see 2:30–33 for the fuller context.

¹⁹ Asad, note 22, in reference to Q 2:30.

²⁰ Especially Q 41:53, see also 51:20–21

²¹ See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilisation in Islam*, Introduction, where he points out that the *presupposition* of all aspects of science and art are for the purpose of providing the means to contemplate the unity of the cosmos, which is a reflection of the Divine unity (emphasis mine); See also Ibn Arabi, *Futuh al-Makkiya* on ordinary people's need for images; See also Aryn B. Sajoo, "Beyond the Exotic: the pleasures of 'Islamic' art", *The Ismaili United Kingdom*, no 42 (July 2001), 16–18, see esp p 17, where he discusses entering into the spirit as well as the aesthetic content of the art, adding that "often, this requires a conscious effort to cast beyond the obvious and resist the facile appeal of forms – rather like searching beyond the *zahir* for the *batin*, the inner significance that lies beneath the surface".

²² My heartfelt thanks to Seyed Mohammad Hossein Mousavi Jazayeri for his unfailing generosity in helping me to "see" the mosque at long distance through photographs and videos in order to let me locate the inscription in its full context.

²³ The full *ruku'at* are 36:1–12 and 36:13–33

²⁴ Hadith, Al-Tirmidhi (209–279/324–892), *Al-Jami' al-Kabir* (also called *Al-Sunan*), 2812/A (& Maqal, & Dhahabi, d.748/1348 AD), *The Prophet (saw) said*, "whoever recites Yasin once Allah will record the reward of reciting the Qur'an ten times"

consistently with the surviving portions, the surah could have been mapped exactly to the inside of the perimeter wall, starting at the south west door near the Qibla wall with room in the short section of wall beside that door to place the *bismalah*. In relation to this, it should be noted that significant points in the surviving text have not only been marked but can be mapped to the physical structure of the mosque and (as shown in fig 1) if the whole surah had indeed been placed on the wall, other significant points would also have coincided with parts of the mosque's structure. Clearly, then, it would have been feasible to encircle the prayer hall entirely with this surah, and it is possible that the recessed panels in the south east mosque wall originally held a continuation of the inscription (although they now hold later cursive inscriptions)²⁵. Yet it would be premature to conclude that this was indeed done and it is possible that the implicit presence evoked by this feasibility would have been sufficient.

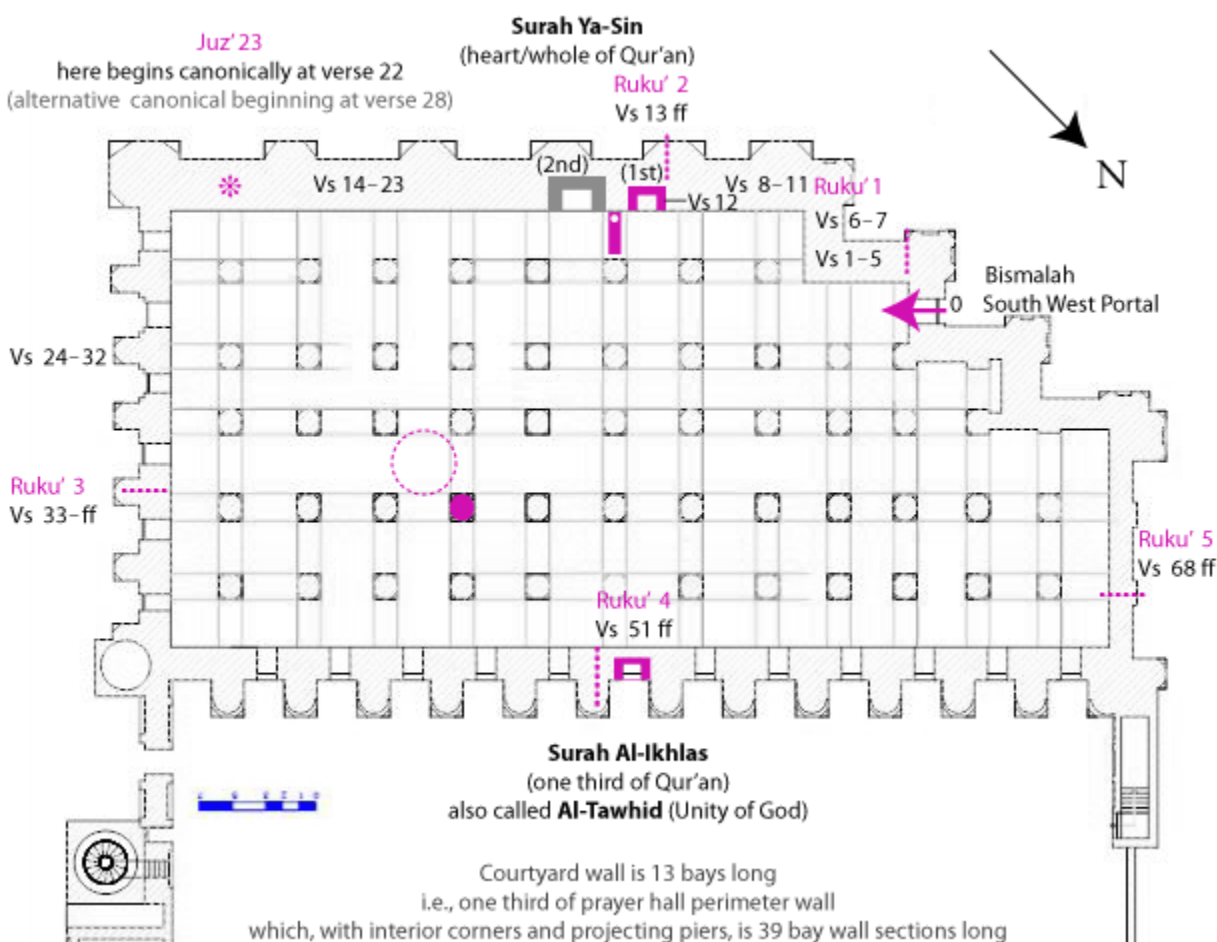


Fig 1 Plan of prayer hall, Friday Mosque, Shoushtar, showing potential distribution of interior inscription. Most of the inscription on the Qibla wall survives. The rest is inferred from the scale of the surviving portions. *Ruku'* divisions (purple dotted bars) occur at the south west portal, the top of the mihrab, behind the summer mihrab on the courtyard wall, and on each side wall. Half-*ruku'* divisions occur at each corner of the Qibla wall.

²⁵ There may also be the remains of a recessed continuation panel in the short north west wall at the end of the Qibla aisle.

Decoration and Mark-up, ruku' 2

Not only has the surviving text been mapped to the structure of the mosque and its furnishings, it has also been marked at significant points, even though no one could ever have achieved a comprehensive view of it. These points articulate two traditional recitation structures and one correct reading.²⁶ The same recitation structures and reading directives are marked in today's printed Qur'ans, whose more familiar editorial conventions are easier to recognize. On this medieval frieze, the mark-up is made through changes in the floral decoration and in the location of the script. These become noticeable as soon as it is accepted that the rest of the text is treated quite consistently: it proceeds in an uncompromisingly straight line and the decoration of ruku' 2 (which began at the top of the mihrab) consists of a lacy embroidery of slender tendrils bearing dainty little flowers and leaves. There are three obvious interruptions to this format, occurring (as in contemporary printed Qur'ans) at verse endings, and these should now be identified.

The first interruption marks the exact mid-point of this half-ruku'. It comes at the end of verse 17 (*but we are not bound to do more than clearly deliver the message* [Asad]), where a nūn has been given a completely unique treatment by having its decorative ascender deflected diagonally so that the whole word looks like a hinged draftsman's desk (fig 2). Sprouting from the base of this inclined surface is a large scrolling leaf marked with horizontal squiggles possibly evocative of writing. A second smaller and more abstract scroll grows out of the ghāyn that now looks like a small cantilever desk in the word immediately before it (fig 3). Perhaps it is fanciful to see these as written folios just now completed by the scribes and still on their desks, but perhaps also the fancy was deliberately suggested: the words are *الْمُيِّن* (deliver²⁷) for the big scroll and *الْبَلَاغُ* (message) for the smaller one, and we know from verse 14, which almost certainly appeared earlier in the frieze, that *two* messengers came to deliver their messages. So the decorative elaboration at this point marks a mathematically exact division of the ruku' while at the same time making an attractive visual allusion to the message of the text.



Fig 2 Draftsman's desk with straight legs and hinged inclined surface. Inset: nūn of final word in verse 17 (image copyright?)

Fig 3 Cantilever desk with curved legs and inclined surface. Inset: ghāyn of penultimate word in verse 17 (image copyright?)

²⁶ These are the most obvious text markings, although several others seem also to exist (see especially the end of vs 22)

²⁷ Asad and Arberry translate this word as deliver; other authorised translations include convey, proclaim, set out, and transmit

The second interruption comes at the transition between verse 20 and 21, where the last two words of verse 20 appear in superscript, along with the first word of 21. The text then returns to the spot on the bottom line where it had broken off, creating the impression of a continuous line of script with (perhaps) an afterthought floating above it (fig 4). In a contemporary printed Qur'an this transition is generally marked with a superscript لا ("no") to indicate that the reciter must not stop between the verses, which convey the full urgent message of the man who came running from the far end of the village, calling ... *Oh my people! Follow these message bearers!* [۞]*Follow those who ask no reward of you and themselves are rightly guided!* (Asad).

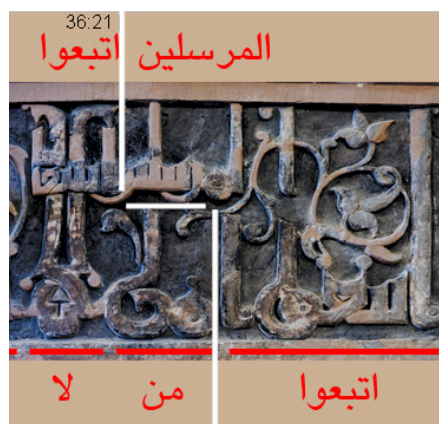


Fig 4 No-stop cross-over from verse 20 to 21



Fig 5 Large rosette marking end of verse 21, start of juz' 23

A third and prominent interruption occurs at the end of verse 21, where there is a unique and very large circular flower with 40 petals (fig 5). This marks one of the two canonical starting points for the 23rd *juz'* (Qur'an segment, plural *azija'*). The 30 *azija'* are unconnected to the *ruku'at*; they form a parallel, alternative system of much larger sections defined by length rather than thematic coherence. However, although the *azija'* are canonically listed, there are two, almost identical and equally canonical traditional lists²⁸. One of their differences is found at *juz'* 23, which begins at verse 22 according to one list (where it is known as *wama liya*, which are the first words in verse 22) or at verse 28 according to the other (where it is known as *wamaā unzalnā 'alā qaumihi mimba'dih*, which are the first words in verse 28). Most contemporary printed Qur'ans appear to favor the use of verse 22²⁹, although most contemporary recitations online favor the use of verse 28. Strangely enough, these recitations are often set without comment in association with a scanned Qur'an that shows the division at verse 22. In the frieze at Shoushtar, the selection of verse 22 seems to have been perforce since the Qibla enscription ends before verse 28. The *ruku'at* and the *azija'* are rival systems for reciting a *khtam* (complete Qur'an recitation), and setting the marker for verse 22 was the only way to acknowledge them both within the frieze on the Qibla wall.

As references to complete Qur'an recitations, both systems complement this particular surah that – as the “heart” of the Qur'an – also refers to it in its entirety.³⁰ Each system facilitates *tarawih*, the recitation of the entire Qur'an in sections during the optional extra prayers often performed congregationally during Ramadan, led by an imam. Each system is canonical and the difference

²⁸ cf Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Saint Coran: traduction integrale et notes*, Paris: Club Français du Livre, n.d., pXLI, table showing that the two lists differ in only 8 places

²⁹ e.g. the English translation by Maulana Muhammad Ali

³⁰ See notes 2 and 24

involves the identification and quantity of the Qur'anic verses to be recited in any one *raka'* (prayer-sequence), with a consequent effect on the number of days it takes to complete the cycle.

The *azija'* are designed to allow the recitation to be completed on the 30th day of Ramadan (which is a 29–30 day synodic lunar month). Thus, there are 30 *azija'*, and each is divided into two main subsections (*ahzab*), which are in turn subdivided into quarters (*rubu'at*). Each *salah* (prayer-set) therefore requires the recitation of 8 *rubu'at*, or one *juz'*, in order to complete the tarawih cycle in 30 days. In contrast, the *ruku'at* are designed to allow the recitation to be completed on the 27th day of Ramadan (that is, to be completed within a 27 day nodal lunar month). In ideal principle, there are 540 *ruku'at* and each *salah* therefore requires them to be recited in sets of 20 in order to complete the tarawih cycle in 27 days³¹. The differences between the systems notwithstanding, each is canonical, as is each variant of the *azija'* division. Like a contemporary printed Qur'an, therefore, the frieze at Shoushtar recognizes both kinds of tarawih, and thus makes two extra references to the entirety of the Qur'an (the *surah* itself, as the heart of the Qur'an, and the two systems for making a complete recitation).

Also in ideal principle, reciting the Qur'an is performed in association with another *dhikr* (act of remembrance) loosely designated *al-tasbīh* (a word that means both “to travel quickly” and “duties”) and this too can be seen in the structure of the mosque. The association is explained, mandated and defined in the Qur'an itself, which explains in the Surah Baqarah (Q2:185),

It was the month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was [first] bestowed from on high (or Y Ali: “sent down”; or Picktall, M Ali: “revealed”) as a guidance unto man and a self-evident proof of (or Y Ali: “clear signs for”) that guidance, and as the standard by which to discern the true from the false. Hence, whoever of you lives to see this month shall fast throughout it; but he that is ill, or on a journey, [shall fast instead for the same] number of other days. God wills that you shall have ease, and does not will you to suffer hardship; but [He desires] that you complete the number [of days required], and that you extol God for His having guided you aright, and that you render your thanks [unto Him]. (Asad)³²

شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ
بَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَىٰ وَالْفُرْقَانِ فَمَن شَهِدَ مِنْكُمُ الشَّهْرَ
فَلْيَصُمْهُ وَمَن كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَكْمَامٍ
أُخِّرَ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ
وَلِتُكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَيْتُمْ
وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

As a method of extolling God and giving him thanks, the *tasbīh* is associated with the Prophet and his immediate family. Its origin is known through several *ahadith*³³ but its spiritual importance and coherence is established through a series of statements by the Prophet's

³¹ In practice, there are more *ruku'at* than 540, and the count varies according to different criteria between 554 and 558. These extra *ruku'at* are, perhaps, accommodated in the optional extra *witr* prayer-sets at the end of the evening.

³² See also Q 97:1, which states that it was revealed on *Qadr* (Night of Destiny – Asad; Night of Power – Y Ali, Picktall; Night of Majesty – M Ali), and Q 44:3–4, which states that it was revealed on a blessed night and reiterates its clarity as guidance.

³³ cf notes 36 and 37; also cf *Kanz al-'Ummāl* [hadith collection by Ali ibn Abd-al-Malik Husam al-Din al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, d.975/1567, based on As-Suyuti], vol 2, p 57;

descendants Muhammad ibn ‘Alī Bāqir (d. 114/733)³⁴ and Ja’far al-Sādiq (d.148/765)³⁵. In one hadith, it was taught by the Prophet to people generally³⁶, and in another he taught it to his daughter Fatima in particular³⁷ (thus giving rise to its more specific name, the *Tasbīh of Fatima Zahra*). Further, it has come to be considered the best of all dhikr because, according to a late tradition recording a comment by ‘Alī Bāqir, if there had been a superior one, the Prophet would have taught it to Fatima³⁸. As an act of dhikr, the tasbīh consists of 33 repetitions of the words *Subhana Allah* (generally translated as “Glory be to Allah”³⁹), followed by 33 repetitions of the words *Alhamdulillah* (Thanks be to God); and 34 repetitions of the words *Allahu Akbar* (generally translated as “God is Greatest” or “God is Greater”).

Regarding the benefits of reciting the tasbīh, Ja’far al-Sādiq pointed to several. He emphasized the importance of performing it, as the Prophet did, while still in *tashahhud* (kneeling at the end of the daily prayers): “One who recites the Tasbīh of Hazrat Zahra after *wajib* (obligatory) *namaz* (*salat*) before he stretches out his legs (i.e. still in tashahhud), then Jannat (Paradise) becomes *wajib* upon him”⁴⁰, and again if recited while still in tashahhud, “Allāh will forgive him”⁴¹. He also advised, “adhere to it [tasbīh] and be regular about its recitation, for surely one who is steadfast upon its recitation will not encounter adversity”⁴².

The Tasbīh of Fatima is also apparently mapped onto the mosque in the 34 bays that form the outer ambulatory (fig 6). As with the surah Ya-Sin, it is not clear whether the words were ever inscribed onto the walls or piers but, again, the important aspect may simply be that it would have been logistically possible to have done so. Thus the structure of the mosque contains the tasbīh in implication close beside the enscription of part of the surah that represents the entire Qur’an (itself implicitly contained in the structure of the mosque), given in Ramadan with the explicit instruction to observe that holy month with fasting, extolling God, and giving Him thanks⁴³.

³⁴ 5th Twelver Shi’ite Imām

³⁵ 6th Twelver Shi’ite Imām

³⁶ Al-Tirmidhi (209–279/824–892), *Jami’ at-Thirmidhi*, 3332

³⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari* (completed c.231/846), hadith 4.344 (Tasbih of Fatima)

³⁸ *Wasāil al-Shī’a* [hadith collection considered authentic by Shi’a Muslims, by Shaikh al-Hur al-Aamili (Akhbarian) 1033/1624–1105/1693] in 20 vols, vol 4, p 1204

³⁹ Strictly speaking, the word *tasbīh* refers to this phrase alone.

⁴⁰ *Falah as-Sa’il* [?book of prayers] by Sayyid Ibn Tawus (589–664/1193–1266), p 165

⁴¹ *Tahdib al-Ahkam* (Refinement of laws [one of most reliable hadith collections, for Shi’as]) by Shaykh Tusi (Abu Ja’far Muhammad b. al-Hasan b. ‘Ali b. al-Hasan al-Tusi, 384–460/995–1067), vol 2, p 105

⁴² Muhammad ibn Ya’qub al-Kulayni (250–329/864–941), *Furū Al-Kafi* (*Kitab al-Salāt*) (Sufficient in the Knowledge of the Faith (Book of Prayers), p 343 (Twelver Shia collection of ahadith)

⁴³ The mathematical encoding of the tasbīh and salat into the structure of the prayer hall may also be found in other mosques, although the organization as a circuit that could be walked or paced continuously if so desired seems to be unique to Shoushtar. Examples of early hypostyle prayer halls that apparently encode the 5 daily salat with their total of 17 raka’at are found at Kufa, Iraq (1st/7th century) and in the mosques of Ibn Tulun (3rd/9th century), Al-Azhar and Al-Hakim (both 4th/10th century) in Cairo. All these mosques have prayer halls 5 aisles deep and 17 bays wide. Mosques with prayer halls 17 bays wide but lacking apparent reference to the number 5 include that at Kairouan, North Africa (1st/7th century), that of La Giralda in Spain (6th/12th century), and particularly significantly, perhaps, the near contemporary Abbasid mosque of Mutawakkil (c.235/850) in Samarra, whose architectural style is closely related to the mosque of Shoushtar. This mosque has a courtyard 17 bays wide while the total length of the prayer hall and courtyard, which can be walked without interruption, is 34 bays. The other tasbīh number is 11, and this number controls the prayer halls at Al-Aqsar, Jerusalem (86/705), the Great mosque at Damascus (87/706), and at Cordoba, Spain (established from its founding in 167–169/784–6 through its third extension in 376/987 when the total length of the prayer hall was made 34 bays long).

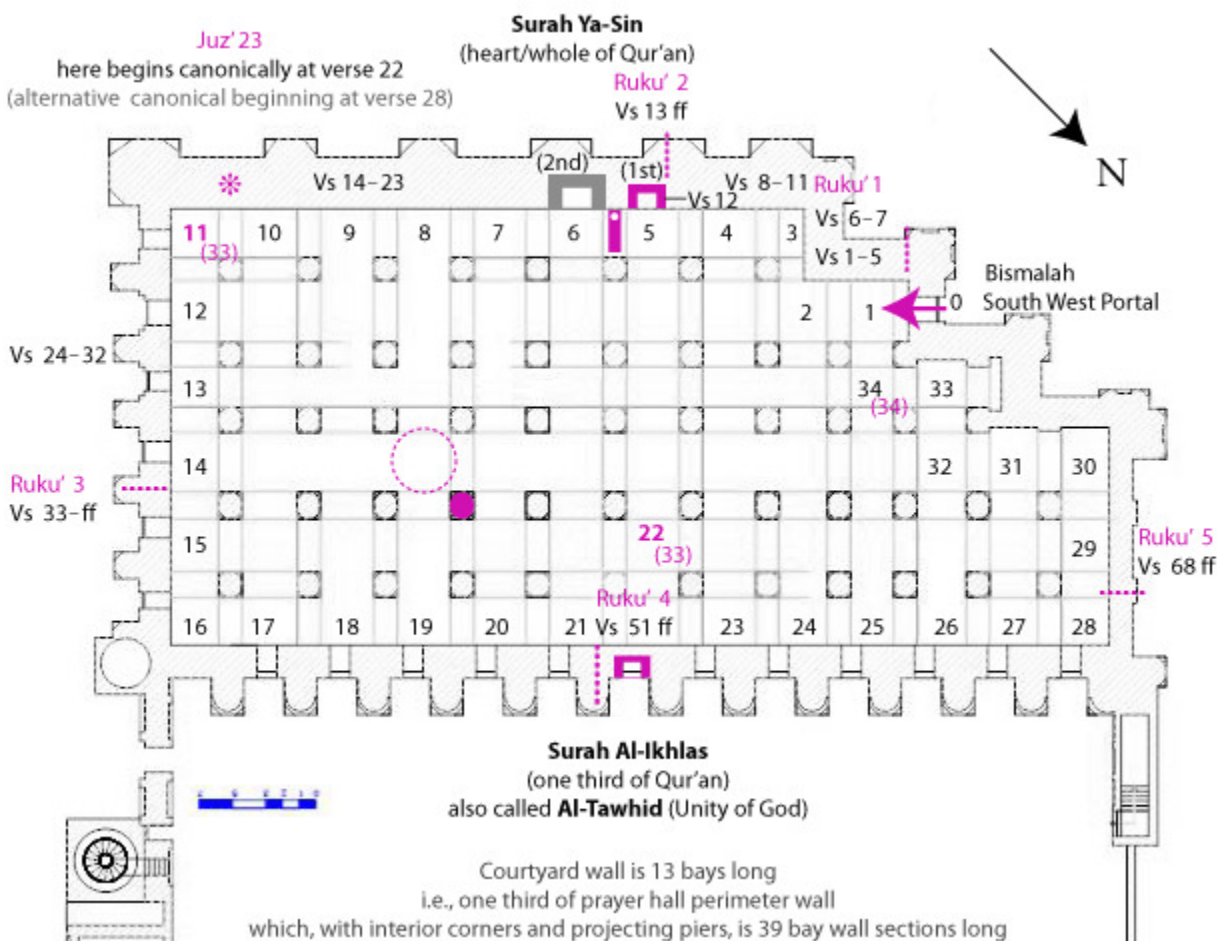


Fig 6 Plan of prayer hall, Friday Mosque, Shoushtar, showing bays corresponding to the raka'at of the tasbīh. Beginning at the south west portal, the one-third divisions occur at the south east corner of the Qibla wall and behind the courtyard mihrab. It may not have been necessary to mark these locations, since they are architecturally obvious.

Decoration and Mark-up, ruku' 1

To return to the inscription itself, there is more to be discovered about the decorative mark-up, as the fragment of ruku' 1 that runs towards the minbar is treated rather differently from the fragment of ruku' 2 just discussed. It includes no textual divisions but the content appears to have required visual commentary for the attentive reader with a little experience of floriated Kufic. This ruku' concerns the refusal of earlier generations to believe the messengers of God, and God says (verse 9), *And We have set a barrier before them and a barrier behind them, and We have enshrouded them in veils so that they cannot see* (Asad). In contrast to the unintrusive treatment of the floral decoration in ruku' 2, this section of the text is embellished with rather large flowers and billowing veil-like leaves. This could confuse the reader who would be expecting the large forms to mark the ends of verses. Here, they appear throughout the text like intrusive background chatter. Moreover, these large forms are organized alternately so that each symmetrical motif is set between a reflecting pair of veil-like foliations, thus adding a visual reference to the veils and the barriers before and behind the disbeliever to the confusing use of "verse-end" motifs just mentioned. But the decorative commentary goes further than this, as may be seen through a comparison with an early Qur'an which, like the mosque at Shoushtar, gave special treatment to particular surat. The Qur'an survives in a few separate leaves that include the

surat *Ya-Sin* and *Al-Ikhlās*, which have been treated more decoratively than the rest of the text (fig 7, fig 8).



Fig 7 Folio from a Qur'an, c.440/c.1050 AD, end of surah 35 and beginning of surah 36, *Ya-Sin*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund 1945, 45.140 (folio 25.1 cm × 18.1 cm) (image copyright will be payable)

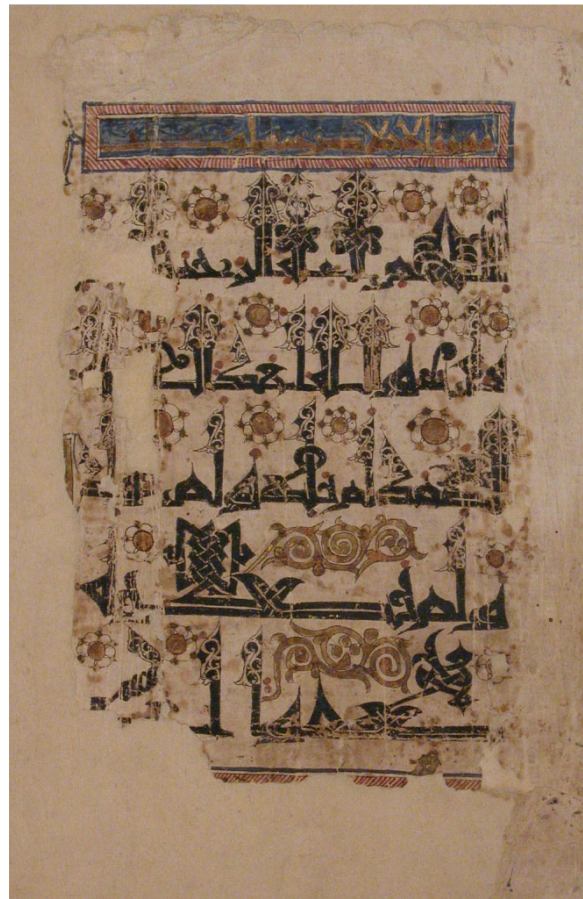


Fig 8 Folio from the same Qur'an, entire surah 112, *Al-Ikhlās* (image copyright will be payable)

For each of these, the Kufic has been embellished with fairly large flowers that appear centrally in the space above each word. In the surah *Al-Ikhlās*, similar flowers appear at the end of each verse, slightly enlarged. On this folio, too, the decoration seems to form a commentary on the text: on the last two lines (*And there is NOTHING || LIKE the One*), the two emphatically enlarged words are vertically aligned and embellished with an extended spiraling plant trail each that initially seem to match but on closer inspection are quite different.

The significance of the large flowers on the enscription at Shoushtar now becomes apparent. These flowers initially seem to mark the words as in the Qur'an manuscript but on closer inspection it is found that they do not. Instead, they span the gaps between the words, as if somehow the words had been broken up and reformed nonsensically. The narrative content of these verses, therefore, which states that God confused the unbelievers by setting barriers and veils before and behind them so that they cannot see, are reflected in the decoration with its reflecting veil-forms and its misplaced word-markers and verse-markers. Any attempt to use its decorative articulations in the customary way, could only be utterly confusing.

But the ruku' ends at verse 12 with a statement that the dead will be given life and everything that they have done and caused will be recorded "in a clear writing" (M Ali), or in some form of

clearly written record, register or book (Asad, Picktall, Y Ali). This is the content of the fourth surviving fragment of the enscription, which defines the vertical border and part of the top of the original mihrab. There is no intrusively elaborate decoration in this fragment, as in verses 8–10, and no dainty background decoration as in ruku' 2. Both the solemnity of the warning in this section and the reference to clear writing are reflected in its almost austere plainness, which is alleviated only by a few buds and leaves around the initial words promising to give the dead life.

To map the text to the Qibla wall, it begins in the corner at the mathematical midpoint of the first ruku' (thus breaking up a system that is designed to preserve the sense, rather than the mathematics, of the Qur'an). It proceeds in beautiful chaos while it describes the confusion created by God for the unbelievers. At the end of these "confusion" verses, it meets the side of the mihrab where it turns vertical at the mention of giving the dead new life and becomes severely plain and clear in reference to the clear written record of all their deeds. At that same point is the minbar where the khatib will preach clear sermons beside the mihrab that clearly shows the direction of Mecca. The new ruku' begins immediately, and its clarity, structure and content are reflected in the now moderate decoration that includes verse-ends, no-stop points, a juz' marker, and references to clearly delivered messages. It then proceeds in uncompromising clarity to the end of the wall, where the half-ruku' also ends (see figs 1 and 6).

The Frieze in relation to the mosque

The choice of location for the frieze is as fascinating as the frieze itself and seems to be an essential aspect of its functionality. As already noted, its surviving parts are set on the Qibla wall in a long narrow passageway in what was originally the darkest part of the mosque, and can never have been seen from the rest of the prayer hall except in glimpses between the piers. The best (but nonetheless limited) view of it would be from within the Qibla aisle, where its pale letters might glow dimly against the dark background that would merge with the darkness of the passageway as a whole. Although it is legible, the words and letters quickly converge and shrink into the distance so that only a few words of it can be read at any time. Most of this would also have been true of the other aisles if they had carried the rest of the surah as suggested above: no part of the perimeter wall could have offered a clear view of the frieze. Thus it cannot have been set there to be widely and easily read or to be generally appreciated for its beauty. Yet it is an important text and no opportunity has been missed to render it solemn, legible, complete and beautiful. Its presence, therefore, seems to be the crucial aspect: through the specifically Muslim ontology outlined above, it is the life-giving heart of the mosque. This may be unwrapped in two stages, and the location of the frieze is integral to both. The first concerns the well-known but less well-understood function of the Qur'an to transmit *barakah*, and the second concerns the function of all art, letters and science to facilitate the journey of the *salik* by providing the means to contemplate the unity of God.

In relation to the first stage, the Qur'an as transmitter of *barakah*, the Qur'an states in several places that it is "full of blessing" (*mubarakun*)⁴⁴, adding that it was sent on "Blessed Night" during Ramadan⁴⁵. There is no indication of the nature of this blessing, and it can be understood

⁴⁴ Q 6:92 and 155, and especially 38:29. It is relevant to the difficulties of the concept that the word *mubarakun* is translated variously as "full of blessing (Picktall), full of blessings (Y Ali), blessed (Asad, Arberry), and abounding in good (M Ali)". Y Ali, especially, takes every opportunity to present the word as a rational thing that can be singular or plural, where the other translators present it as an indivisible quality or state.

⁴⁵ Q 44:3; at 97:1, the Qur'an gives this as *Qadr*, the Night of Destiny (Asad), or Power (Y Ali, Picktall, Arberry), or Majesty (M Ali)

in different ways depending on interpretational context. Thus tradition emphasizes the beneficial effects of reciting the Qur'an and consistently points to a series of heavenly rewards and healing; the Qur'an presents the term in association with itself and with places, leading commentators to see it in terms of beneficial natural resources; while linguistic analysis, which embraces those natural resources along with the root of the word, clearly implies that it is a continuing downward flow of goodness, abundance, or increase, from God. With regard to tradition, a brief survey shows the kinds of reward to be expected and clarifies the importance of the surah Ya-Sin. For example, in one hadith it is said that reciting 10 verses of the Qur'an will ensure that we are not recorded as forgetful, 100 verses will label us devout, and 1000 verses will cause us to be recorded as doers of good⁴⁶. In another, the Prophet says that reading a single letter from the Qur'an will gain a reward multiplied by ten⁴⁷. Finally, the Qur'an will intercede for us on the Day of Judgment⁴⁸. This is the context in which to understand the benefit of reciting just the surah Ya-Sin, which, as mentioned above, will be rewarded as if the whole Qur'an had been recited ten times⁴⁹.

Regarding the Qur'anic use of the word *barakah*, there are a few important references. Surah 3:96 specifies that the first temple was at Bakkah (i.e. the Ka'aba at Mecca⁵⁰), which is "rich in blessing (*mubarakan*) and a [source of] guidance unto all the worlds (Asad)". Surah 17:1 refers to the masjid Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, "the environs of which we had blessed (*barakna*) (Asad)". Again, there is no indication in the Qur'an itself about the nature of this blessing, although early commentaries understand it in terms of fruits and river courses and the burial places of prophets and righteous people⁵¹.

It may be that the commentators' understanding of the word *barakah* in terms of rivers and fruit is derived from the linguistic relationship between that word and several designations for rivers and ripening fruit that share a common meaningful root. However, different words are used for these concepts and while their undeniable associations augment the word and also demonstrate its wide range of applicability, its own connotations are more directly abstract and in that way they point back to the origin of all good in the immaterial Divine and His Qur'an.

⁴⁶ Abu Dawood and Ibn Hibban; (hadith *qudsi*) *Sunan Abu Dawood*, Book 2 (Prayer), chapter "On Fixing a Part of the Qur'an for Daily recitation", hadith no 952, 002.1393 (002.0497), narrated by Abdullah ibn Amr ibn al-'As [<http://quransearchonline.com/Hadith/AbuDawood/HRef-11.asp?Ref=002.1393#.UWdjFzdqW5I>] Sahih al Targhib, 635

⁴⁷ Tirmidhi (hadith *hasan*, *sahih*, with isnad *gharib*) *Jami' at-Tirmidhi*, English translation S. M. MadniAbbasi, *Hadith Al-Tirmidhi*, compiler Imam Abu ZakariyaYahya bin Sharaf an-Nawawi, Karachi: International Islamic Publishers, Karachi, 1983, hadith no 560, narrated by Abdullah ibn Mas'ud

⁴⁸ At-Tabarani

⁴⁹ See notes 2 and 24

⁵⁰ Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, note 75 (Quran ref: 3:96).

⁵¹ Abu Al-Hasan 'Ali Bin Habib Al-Mawardi Al-Basri (21–110/c.642–c.728), *An-Nukat Wa'Al-'Uuyn* (State of Kuwait: Ministry of Waqfs and Islamic Affairs, 1982) Part II, p 421; Abu 'Abd-Allah Muhammad Bin Ahmad Al-Ansari Al-Qurtubi 610–671/1214–1273 ad), *Al-Jami' Li-Ahkam Al-Qur'an*, Part X, p 212 (cited by Taysir Nashif, *The Territorial significance of "Alladhi Barakna Hawlahu" according to Muslim Commentaries of the Holy Quran*, paper presented at the Twentieth Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), October 1991, Royce Hotel, Detroit, MI. Nashif also cites contemporary Qur'anic commentators (Muhammad Mahmud Hijazi and Abu Al-Fadl Shihab Ad-Din Mahmud Al-Alusi Al-Baghdadi) whose understanding of the *barakah* of Al-Aqsar embraces only the water and the agricultural verdure resulting from it.

The meaning of the word is carried in its root, برك *b-r-k* (to settle)⁵². This root is shared with a number of other words which also exploit the idea of actively settling, including بركة *birkah*, a pool, pond, lake, unlined well, or a stretch of river (all fed by the settling of rain); *birkah* is also associated with baked-brick cisterns of water on the way to Mecca, and the watering places at Mecca itself; *birkah* is also the kneeling of a camel⁵³, while برك *barku* is the kneeling of a lion or a man. Another word with the same root, *bark*, is one or more camels kneeling near water or for rest⁵⁴. بركة *Barakah* is any good, blessing or abundance (material or intellectual) from God, with the concomitant sense that it comes down or settles⁵⁵, and in a complementary sense Al-Azhari presents it as describing God's superiority over everything⁵⁶. It is in connection with this concept of highness that an early reference makes an association with fruit, in the use of the word بُورِك *buraka* to convey the sense that olive and pomegranate ripen and fall (spring or gush) from overhead⁵⁷. The core emphasis on an active settling from God (blessing, rain, paradisial fruit) or before God (kneeling) becomes clear when these words are written in the standard way, without the vowels that differentiate them. It is now clear that when the Qur'an describes itself as having been "sent down" (Q2:185), and as being "full of blessing"⁵⁸, the two aspects are inseparable. Since the sense of settling is active, the Qur'an and its *barakah* may be understood as still in the act of settling, which may account for the location of the Shoushtar enscription half way down the wall, as if literally coming down or settling from above.

The second stage returns to the opening discussion in which it was shown that the Qur'an, as the origin-source of truth, provides that the purpose of humanity is to contemplate the unity of God and by necessary inference all science, philosophy and creative expression is directed to facilitating that activity, it is clear that the mosque and the Ya-Sin inscription were indeed designed to this end. It will be remembered that all in creation, including the Qur'an, its words and letters, and *barakah*, are tied by the threads of their own existence to their origin in God, and therefore they act as *majaz* back to God. Semantically, the *majaz* is a metaphor whose purpose is to achieve a striking expansion in awareness through a surprising parallel. Linguistically, it is a corridor, a place to travel through⁵⁹. quickly" and "duties", and it consists of 100 *dhikr* whose recitation are mandated and defined by the Qur'an (2:185) in association with the sending of the Qur'an itself.

These *dhikr* are expressed in the design of the mosque, whose unusual (possibly unique) zigzag wall enables the ambulatory to encircle the prayer hall in exactly 34 bays of about 3 paces each, so that a person could travel physically through that corridor around the mosque reciting those 100 *dhikr* pace by pace, mindfully, without the distracting need to count the repetitions on beads or fingers. The literal corridor then becomes a *majaz* in that while traveling through it, the person would also encounter the unfurling inscription of the Surah Ya-Sin implicitly descending from the top of the wall, as the ambulatory (which is dark unless artificially lighted) generates a

⁵² Cyril Glassé and Huston Smith, "Arabic", *The New Encyclopedia of Islam: Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, Rowman Altamira, 2003, p57

⁵³ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1893, vol 1, 194, col 2, بركة *birkah*,

⁵⁴ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1893, vol 1, 193, col 3, برك *bark*

⁵⁵ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, بركة (barakah), vol 1, p194, col 2,

⁵⁶ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, بركة (barakah), vol 1, p194, col 2, citing Abū-Mansūr Al-Azhari (282–370/895–981), *Al-Tadhib fī l-lughah*.

⁵⁷ See the short verse by the Prophet's uncle and foster father Abu Talib ibn Abdul Muttalib (d. -3/619), Dara O. Shayda, "Baraka, Tabaraka", untiredwithloving/baraka.html

⁵⁸ cf note 44

⁵⁹ cf note 17

*mithal*⁶⁰ in the form of sequential *mathal*⁶¹ of the Paradise-styled⁶² letters and words of the surah that represents the entire Qur'an, projected in space like their *mumaathila*⁶³ in the Malakut⁶⁴. Thus the salik makes a fully aware physical beginning for the journey back to his or her origin in God and encounters the majaz of the sequentially revealed inscription that provides means⁶⁵ to contemplate the unity of God through the Qur'an as surat and ayat of the horizons and inmost heart of His cosmos⁶⁶, and through this, perhaps, by completing the journey internally to become a fit *khalifah* to guard the cosmos.

Conclusion

The enscription can be appreciated as something beautiful in its own right, yet by discovering its textual mark-ups, its divisions in relation to the mosque, and the design of the mosque in relation to the Qur'an and to prayer, we discover that in accordance with the Islamic ontology outlined above, it is an intellectual portal to the spiritual journey we all make. It begins with the mosque itself, whose architectural structure is, like many early mosques⁶⁷, an expression of the Qur'an and tasbīh. Tradition prescribes reciting the tasbīh in association with the five daily salat comprising a total of 17 raka'at, which are also commonly expressed in the architecture of early mosques, although Shoushtar focuses on the Qur'an and tasbīh. It continues with the enscription that can be seen half way down the ambulatory wall as if still in the process of descending, having been sent down from God with barakah. This is the context for the next, optional, stage of the journey, in which the ardent traveler in search of God is invited to make a conscious symbolic initiation of his or her internal journey by entering the north west portal and traveling down the "corridor" (a physical majaz) of the ambulatory and encountering the letters and words of the Qur'an as they might be seen or imagined in the Malakut. Like the Qur'an of which they form a part, and like the barakah they help to transmit, the words and letters are directly connected with their origin in God who transmits them through the Malakut into the Mulk, where they form a metaphysical and semantic corridor back to God. Thus they arrive, as the Qur'an says, full of guidance as well as blessing for the benefit of those seeking to contemplate the unity of God.

⁶⁰ i.e. a metaphor, cf note 15

⁶¹ i.e. a perceived image or result, cf note 15

⁶² i.e. Foliated and Floriated Kufic

⁶³ i.e. counterpart, cf note 15

⁶⁴ cf note 14, where Suhrawardi set the Alam-Al-Mithal at the threshold of the Malakut. Suhrawardi (548–586/1154–1191) was writing some hundred years after the Ya-Sin inscription whose location in the ambulatory at Shoushtar seems to anticipate his metaphysics as described by Corbin (*op.cit.*, 214–215): "It [the Alam Al-Mithal] is ... the world of Forms and Images 'in suspension' (*muthulmu 'allaqah*), [which] possess 'epiphanic places' (*mazahir*) where they manifest themselves like the image 'in suspension' in a mirror. This world contains all the richness and variety of the world of sense in a subtle state; it is a world of subsistent and autonomous Forms and Images, the threshold of the *Malakut*. ... it is the place of the 'subtle bodies'. It is by virtue of it that the symbols configured by the prophets, as well as all visionary experiences, are actually true. Consequently, it is through the *mundus imaginalis* that the *ta'wil* is achieved, that is to say the exegesis which 'leads back' the data of the Quranic Revelation to their 'literal spiritual' truth. Without it, there is only 'allegory'. ..."

⁶⁵ Nasr, cf note 21

⁶⁶ cf note 20

⁶⁷ cf note 43