

Intertextual and Conceptual Chaining in Punishment and Mercy Narratives: A Study of Surah *al-Naml*

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Abstract

This study explores the intertextual relationships and conceptual chaining present in the punishment and mercy narratives of the four stories in Surah al-Naml. The primary objective is to identify and analyze the conceptual and semantic links that unify the stories within this chapter of the Quran. Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilizes content analysis and thematic analysis to investigate the narratives' conceptual and textual connections at both micro and macro levels. The data comprises the verses related to the four stories in Surah al-Naml, analyzed through a comparative framework. Initially, the study defines key concepts such as intertextuality and conceptual chaining, followed by a discussion of the relevant theoretical background. The comparative analysis reveals robust intertextual links and intricate conceptual chains that enhance the coherence and semantic structure of the Surah. The findings demonstrate that these interrelations not only facilitate a deeper understanding of the narratives' meanings but also contribute to a more accurate and comprehensive interpretation of the chapter's themes. This aligns with the objectives of Surah al-Naml, which are to admonish and warn its audience. The research underscores the significance of examining intertextual relationships and conceptual chaining in Quranic studies, suggesting that such approaches can

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How to Cite: Horri, A. (2024). Intertextual and Conceptual Chaining in Punishment and Mercy Narratives: A Study of Surah al-Naml, *A Research Journal on Qur'anic Knowledge*, 15(58), 73-102. DOI: 10.22054/rjqk.2024.81005.2998

uncover new semantic and interpretive dimensions in religious texts. Furthermore, the study's findings offer potential advancements in educational methodologies and Quranic exegesis, providing valuable insights for scholars and commentators.

Keywords: Conceptual Chaining, Surah al-Naml, Micro and Macro Intertextual Relations, Punishment Narratives, Mercy Narratives.

1) Introduction

Since the revelation of the Quran over the course of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) 23-year mission in Mecca and Medina, there has been considerable discussion regarding the narrative elements of the Quranic accounts, particularly those relating to past nations and prophets—referred to in the exegetical tradition as *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbīyā'* (Stories of the Prophets). This interest is primarily driven by the sources of these narratives, which are often rooted in the Hebrew tradition, with some influence from the Christian tradition, and, to a lesser extent, the folklore of the Arabs at the time. While these narratives share thematic and substantive similarities, they do not always align in their narrative structures or methods of storytelling.

A general inquiry into the occasions of revelation (*Asbāb al-Nuzūl*) also underscores the connection between these narratives and the Prophet's biography (*Sīrah*), as well as the historical, social, and contextual milieu in which he lived. From the outset of the Quran's revelation, however, attention has been given to the interrelationships between verses, chapters, and, more specifically, narratives. Traditional scholars of rhetoric (*Balāghah*) have endeavored to uncover the order and coherence within the Quran, focusing on the connections and correspondences between its verses. Their aim has been to demonstrate the Quran's miraculous nature (*I'jāz*) by highlighting the systematic, logical relationships that govern the chapters and the overall cohesive structure of the Quran as a unified *kitāb* (Book).

1.1) Surah al-Naml: Intertextual and Inter-Narrative Connections

One of the Quranic chapters where narratives exhibit significant intertextual and inter-narrative relationships is *Surah al-Naml*. This chapter recounts portions of the stories of four prophets—Moses, Solomon, Saleh, and Lot—while interweaving these accounts with references to Islamic teachings, the *Kitāb al-Mubīn* (Clear Book), the personality and biography of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and other related themes.

For centuries, scholars have examined the connections between individual verses, paired verses, verse clusters, and their complementary or supplementary roles, particularly with regard to the stories of a prophet or a nation. These relationships have also been analyzed in the context of other narratives about the same prophets in different chapters of the Quran, as well as the interconnections between the chapters themselves and, crucially, their links to the Prophetic biography (*Sīrah*).

From the 19th century onward, influenced by Biblical studies, orientalist scholars have focused extensively on the textual relationships within the Quran. Some have even argued that the Quran lacks cohesion, presenting a collection of disjointed and randomly assembled fragments, thus dismissing any notion of an organic structure or divine arrangement. From this perspective, they contend that the Quran's composition reflects human intervention, particularly the judgments and efforts of the Prophet's companions in arranging and organizing its verses.

These critics, however, overlook the fact that discussions of coherence and structure—albeit in less technical terms—have been present since the Quran's early revelation. Moreover, in the 20th century, both Muslim and Western scholars began to explore the Quran's coherence using linguistic and technical methodologies, offering more nuanced interpretations of its structural integrity.

In the case of *Surah al-Naml*, the verses relating to the four aforementioned stories not only demonstrate inter-verse relationships but also exhibit broader intertextual and inter-narrative connections. These textual and narrative segments are intricately interwoven, not only with one another but also with the chapter's opening and concluding passages, which engage with the Prophetic biography and address audiences across all generations.

The central hypothesis of this study is that these verses and narrative elements constitute an organic whole, intricately interconnected not only with one another but also with the entirety of *Surah al-Naml*, as well as with the broader context of the Prophet's life and mission.

1.2) The Significance of Quranic Stories and Their Intertextual Connections

On one hand, Quranic stories (*Qaṣaṣ al-Quran*) have long captured the attention of both religious and literary scholars. Among these, the *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiya* (Stories of the Prophets) hold particular significance—not only for their religious value but also for their literary and cultural importance. Throughout history, these stories have served as a rich source of inspiration for both religious and literary interpretations, profoundly influencing various cultures.

On the other hand, the intertextual relationships and conceptual chaining within Quranic stories have received less scholarly attention. Investigating these relationships can contribute to a deeper understanding of Quranic verses, narratives, and their associated concepts.

The primary aim of this article is to examine and analyze the intertextual connections and conceptual chaining between Quranic narratives that focus on the themes of punishment (*Mukāfāt*) and mercy (*Raḥmat*). The main research questions are:

1. How different Quranic stories are conceptually and textually linked?
2. How do these connections enhance the understanding of Quranic texts, particularly the narratives in *Surah al-Naml*?

Given the significance of the topic, this study employs methods of textual analysis and intertextual examination. The narratives concerning the people of Pharaoh, the Queen of Sheba, the people of Thamūd, and the people of Lot are analyzed in detail.

The findings of this research may offer valuable insights into the structure and conceptual framework of the Quran, while also introducing new approaches to interpreting religious texts. A central focus of this analysis is the intertextual (inter-textual) and inter-narrative (inter-Qaṣaṣ) relationships among these stories within *Surah al-Naml* and, in a broader context, their connections to the Prophet's era and life (*Sīrah*).

This article primarily examines the intertextual relationships among the four narratives in *Surah al-Naml*, highlighting their internal

connections within the Surah and their resonance with the historical and prophetic context.

2. Theoretical Foundations of the Discussion

The concept of *ʿIlm al-Munāsabah* (the science of textual harmony), traditionally referred to as *Munāsabah* (coherence) and, in more recent terminology, as *Naẓm* (order), *Insijām* (cohesion), textual chain, intertextual relations, and, less frequently, inter-narrative relations, has consistently captured the attention of both Muslim and non-Muslim Quranic scholars from the time of the Quran's revelation to the present day. This concept is intimately connected to the linguistic inimitability (*Iʿjāz*) of the Quran and its unparalleled nature.

2.1) Connection to the Quran's Inimitability and Unmatchable Nature

The inimitability of the Quran underscores the inability of others to produce anything comparable to it, as explicitly stated in several verses (e.g., *al-Baqarah*/23; *Hūd*/13; *al-Isrāʾ*/88; *al-Ṭūr*/33-34). Given that the Quran is the speech of an unlettered prophet, its unmatchable nature further reinforces its miraculous character. The Quranic *Naẓm* (order) has long been regarded as compelling evidence of this inimitability.

2.2) Definition of *Munāsabah* and Its Role in Quranic *Naẓm*

The term *Munāsabah* linguistically denotes similarity, harmony, proximity, and correspondence (Suyūṭī, 1964 AD/1384 AH: 386). Conceptually, coherence in the Quran evokes the ideas of order and cohesion. *ʿIlm al-Munāsabah* investigates the relationships between Quranic verses within a specific chapter or across multiple chapters, focusing on how these connections contribute to the overall structure and meaning of the text.

2.3) Historical Background and Views on Quranic Order and Cohesion

Studies on Quranic order and cohesion have a long history, dating back to the early centuries of Islam. Mustansir Mir (1986: 10–24)

classifies scholars addressing Quranic *Nazm* into two primary groups:

- 1) Order at the Level of Words and Meanings
This group explores Quranic *Nazm* through the connections between words and their meanings. Prominent figures in this category include:
 - Abū Sulaymān Muḥammad al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388 AH)
 - Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Bāqillānī (d. 403 AH)
 - ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471 AH)
 - Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH)
- 2) Order at the Level of Verses and Chapters
This group emphasizes the organic connections between Quranic verses and chapters. Notable figures in this category include:
 - Al-Zarkashī (745–794 AH)
 - Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (554–606 AH)
 - Al-Suyūfī (849–911 AH)

Among modern scholars, figures such as ‘*Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī*, *Sayyid Qutb*, *Farāhī*, *Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī*, and *Ṭālaqānī* have further developed these ideas.

In essence, ‘*Ilm al-Munāsabah*’ examines the connections and coherence between Quranic verses and chapters. Due to its relationship with the Quran's inimitability and unique order, this discipline holds a distinguished position in Quranic studies. Exploring these connections provides a deeper understanding of the Quran's structure as a revealed text and paves the way for more nuanced and innovative interpretations.

2.4) The Evolution of the Concept of Coherence in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, the concept of *Munāsabah* (coherence) underwent significant expansion, incorporating a variety of modern perspectives. The traditional understanding of ‘*Ilm al-Munāsabah*’—which pertains to the coherence between words, meanings, verses, and chapters—has evolved. Contemporary scholars have broadened this notion to encompass literary and aesthetic coherence, as well as

conceptual and textual chaining in a linguistic sense. The synthesis of these approaches suggests that the Quran, as a whole, can be seen as a cohesive and unified text, with interconnected layers of meaning and structure.

2.4)1. Responses to Western Critiques

In the modern era, some Western thinkers have criticized the Quran's structure, describing it as disordered and incoherent. For example:

- Thomas Carlyle referred to the Quran as "A difficult text... a chaotic, obscure, tedious, unrefined, and rudimentary collection."
- Montgomery Watt characterized the Quranic arrangement as "Disordered" and "Lacking continuous division," noting the perceived challenges of its scale and structure (as cited in Mir, 1986).

In response to these critiques, many Muslim exegetes and scholars have endeavored to demonstrate the Quran's structural coherence. They employ the concept of *Nazm* (order) and modern linguistic methodologies to illustrate the Quran's systematic nature, emphasizing its aesthetic unity and the interrelationship of its parts.

2.4)2. Diverse Contemporary Interpretations of Coherence

Modern exegetes have adopted distinct methodologies to explain the concept of coherence in the Quran, reflecting a wide range of perspectives on the topic. Some of the key interpretations include:

- 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī explores coherence through the concept of a "chapter's purpose" (*Gharāḍ al-Sūrah*).
- Sayyid Quṭb employs the term "Axis" to define thematic unity in the Quran.
- Ḥijāzī highlights the idea of "thematic unity" (*waḥdat mawḍū'iyah*), emphasizing the interconnectedness of themes within each chapter.
- Farāhī and Iṣlāḥī focus on *Nazm* as the foundation of coherence, arguing that the Quran's order arises from the intrinsic relationships between its verses and themes.

Mir (1986: 21) discusses how these various interpretations distinguish themselves, illustrating the diverse methodologies employed by modern exegetes to understand coherence in the Quranic text.

2.4)3. Conceptual and Textual Chaining

More recently, scholars such as ‘Abdul Ra‘ūf (2003) have introduced the term "Conceptual and textual chaining" to describe the coherence within Quranic discourse. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of Quranic concepts and their structural unity, asserting that the Quran’s message is conveyed through a continuous chain of ideas that link individual verses and themes to form a cohesive narrative.

The concept of *Munāsabah* continues to evolve, bridging traditional perspectives with modern linguistic and literary frameworks. Contemporary interpretations not only respond to Western critiques of the Quran’s coherence but also offer new insights into its structural and aesthetic unity. These efforts underscore the Quran’s enduring ability to inspire diverse exegetical and scholarly approaches.

Overall, the transition from traditional scholars who viewed *Naẓm* (order) as the relationship between words and meanings to those who perceive it as the linear connection between verses and chapters reflects a significant transformation in its conceptualization. *Naẓm* has evolved from an abstract notion into a tangible and organic element within the Quranic text, acquiring a more systematic and structured trajectory.

2.5) Early Literary Perspective: Jūrjānī’s Contribution

Earlier traditional scholars, such as ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jūrjānī, approached *Naẓm* from a literary perspective, viewing it as a cohesive element within the Quranic text. Jūrjānī emphasized the literary elegance and structural harmony that emerged from the relationship between words and their meanings. However, later scholars extended the understanding of *Naẓm* beyond the one-to-one correspondence between words and meanings. They began to redefine *Naẓm* as a

linear and systematic connection between individual verses, and, more importantly, between verses and chapters. This shift represented a significant advancement in comprehending the Quran's structural coherence. Nevertheless, even these scholars did not fully conceptualize *Nazm* in terms of thematic or structural unity across the text.

2.5)1. Modern Interpretations of Nazm

In contrast to the traditional interpretations, contemporary scholars and exegetes have redefined *Nazm* as internal coherence and integration within the chapters of the Quran. Scholars such as 'Abdul Ra'ūf (2003) have emphasized the thematic and structural unity of the Quranic text. This modern interpretation moves beyond the linear and structural analysis of *Nazm*, highlighting the text's inherent thematic connections and holistic structure—an aspect that was largely underdeveloped in earlier scholarly discussions. The reinterpretation of *Nazm* as a system of interconnected themes and ideas offers a richer and more nuanced understanding of the Quran's unity, extending its coherence beyond individual verses and chapters.

2.5)2. The Absence of Inter-Narrative Connections

Despite these advancements, both classical and modern scholars have not explicitly addressed the concept of inter-narrative relationships. This concept refers to the connections between narratives within a single chapter, across different chapters, or in relation to the broader prophetic tradition (*Sīrah Nabawīyyah*). While scholars have explored the structural coherence of the Quran at the level of verses and chapters, the relationships between Quranic narratives—how they interconnect within the text and across different parts of the Quran—remain underexplored. This dimension, which could deepen the understanding of the Quranic narrative as a whole, remains a largely unexplored area within the discourse on *Nazm*.

The concept of *Nazm* has undergone a significant transformation from an abstract literary notion to a more systematic and structured framework. Early interpretations focused primarily on the

relationships between words and meanings, while later scholars extended these ideas to include the connections between verses and chapters. Modern interpretations have further refined *Nazm* to emphasize the Quran's thematic coherence and structural integration. However, despite these advancements, the interconnections between Quranic narratives, whether within chapters or across the broader Quranic text, remain largely unexplored and present an exciting avenue for future scholarly inquiry

2.6) Intertextuality and Conceptual Cohesion in Surat al-Naml: A Text-Linguistic Perspective

From a text-linguistic viewpoint, the Quranic verses, revealed in the form of chapters (Surahs), exhibit cohesion through organic and conceptual relationships. These connections exist not only within individual verses and chapters but also extend across chapters and the entire Quranic corpus. Modern discourse refers to these relationships as intertextuality (*Tanāṣṣ* in Arabic). Intertextuality emphasizes the way texts influence, interconnect, and build upon one another, forming a cohesive and integrated narrative.

In the case of Surat al-Naml, the verses and narratives are conceptually and contextually interconnected. They are not only intricately linked within themselves but also harmonize with the life and experiences of the Prophet Muhammad, the primary recipient of the Quranic message. Drawing on ‘Abdul Ra‘ūf’s (2003) framework, this study categorizes cohesion into two primary levels:

2.6)1. Micro-Level Cohesion

At the micro level, cohesion operates through phonological, lexical, and semantic dimensions. The conceptual chaining manifests in:

- **Intra-verse Relationships:** Connections within a single verse.
- **Inter-verse Relationships:** Links between a verse and its preceding or succeeding verses.

‘Abdul Ra‘ūf further categorizes these micro-level chains into:

- **Semantically-Based Chains:** Connections grounded in meaning.
- **Phonologically-Based Chains:** Links established through sound

patterns.

- **Syntax-Based Chains:** Relationships formed through grammatical structures.

These chains are facilitated by linguistic mechanisms such as **correspondence** (*Muṭābaqa*) and **modification** (*Ta'dīl*), which serve to enhance the cohesion of the text at the individual verse level.

2.6)2. Macro-Level Cohesion

At the macro level, the relationships extend beyond individual verses to encompass broader conceptual and textual connections:

- **Between Clusters of Verses:** Para-textual interconnections that tie together groups of verses within a chapter.
- **Between Entire Chapters:** Inter-chapter relationships that provide cohesion across the Quranic text.

The narratives associated with the histories of various prophetic communities within each chapter contribute to the overall cohesion, forming integrated texts. Intertextual relationships between these stories, referred to as **inter-narrative relationships** (*Baynā-Qaṣawī*), serve as analogous connections that enhance the cohesion between chapters and the larger Quranic narrative.

2.6)3. Application to Surat al-Naml

In Surat al-Naml, the narratives demonstrate both micro- and macro-level cohesion. These narratives exhibit conceptual and textual interlinking in several ways:

- **Within the Chapter:** Connections between the opening and concluding verses, as well as among the various narratives within the chapter itself.
- **With the Prophetic Biography (Sīrah):** Thematic and contextual alignment with the life and experiences of the Prophet Muhammad, providing a bridge between the revealed text and the lived experiences of the Prophet.

This article applies 'Abdul Ra'ūf's framework to analyze the conceptual, intertextual, and inter-narrative relationships within Surat al-Naml, focusing primarily on the macro-level cohesion. Given space

constraints, the analysis also touches on key aspects of micro-level cohesion.

This study demonstrates that the narratives in Surat al-Naml form a cohesive and integrated whole. They exhibit textual and thematic coherence both within the chapter itself and in relation to the Quran as a unified corpus. By analyzing the intertextual and inter-narrative relationships, it becomes evident that the Quran's structure is not merely a random arrangement of verses but rather a meticulously organized and interconnected narrative system.

2.6)4. Intertextual and Inter-narrative Connections in the Quranic Stories of Surat al-Naml: A Thematic Analysis

Quranic stories have traditionally been categorized into various types, such as historical, allegorical, and eschatological narratives, among others (cf. Khalaf-Allah, 1981 AD/1402 AH). An analysis of the predominantly Meccan stories reveals that many of these narratives, particularly those concerning God's promise of punishment to ungrateful nations, can be grouped under the overarching theme of punishment-centered stories. In these narratives, a Prophet is sent to guide a nation; some members respond to his call, while the majority rejects it. Despite the Prophet's tireless efforts, the nation remains misguided. The Prophet then calls for divine punishment, which is subsequently unleashed. The righteous are saved, while the disbelievers are destroyed. Notable examples of such nations include those of *Mūsā/Moses*, *Lot*, *Saleh*, *Shu'ayb*, *Nūḥ/Noah*, *Hūd*, and others.

However, there are also stories of nations that heed the Prophet's call and are ultimately saved, such as the people of Jonah and the Queen of Sheba's people. These narratives can be categorized under the theme of mercy-centered stories.

In **Surat al-Naml**, the focus of this study, both types of stories are present:

- **Punishment-centered stories** (e.g., the people of Pharaoh and Moses, the people of Thamūd and Saleh, the people of Lot).
- **Mercy-centered stories** (e.g., the people of the Queen of

Sheba).

This study proposes that an **intertextual** and **inter-narrative** relationship exists between these two sets of stories within Surat al-Naml.

2.7) Inter-Narrative and Intertextual Relationships in Surat al-Naml

The core argument of this study is that all Quranic stories—particularly those categorized as punishment-centered, which are the focus here—not only exhibit internal coherence and organic relations within the Surahs they occupy, but also maintain interconnectedness with events from the prophetic biography (*Sīrah*) over the twenty-three years of Quranic revelation. These connections are not limited to thematic links but extend to an **intertextual** and **inter-narrative chain** that links various Quranic stories together.

Thus, Surat al-Naml exemplifies the interconnectedness of both punishment- and mercy-centered stories, providing a cohesive and integrated narrative. This interconnectedness resonates across both the **textual** and **historical** contexts of the Quranic revelation, illustrating a unified structure that extends beyond individual Surahs.

3. Previous Research

In addition to *ʿIlm al-Munāsaba*, Quranic stories have been examined from both traditional and modern perspectives. Traditionally, scholars have focused more on analyzing the individual elements and components of the stories. In contrast, modern approaches have shifted towards the application of literary criticism and theory to the analysis of Quranic narratives. These contemporary approaches include methodologies such as semiotics and, more significantly, narratology.

Horri (2009 AD/1388 SH; 2010 AD/1389 SH (a); 2010 AD/1389 SH (b)) has contributed to this modern perspective by applying a narratological approach to some Quranic stories. In particular, Horri (1396) explored **intertextual relationships** and **conceptual chains** within the Quranic narrative of Surah *Yūnus*, illustrating the

interconnectedness of the Quranic text through these narrative devices.

4. Research Method

This article adopts a qualitative approach to examine the verses of Surah al-Naml, conducting a comparative analysis of the four narratives within the Surah at both the macro-textual and intertextual (intra-narrative) levels. The study demonstrates that these narratives exhibit a cohesive, organic relationship, with intertextual connections not only within the Surah itself but also between these stories and the Prophet's (PBUH) *Sīrah*. The main objective is to clarify that, contrary to the views of Orientalists who regard the Quran as fragmented and disjointed, the Quran not only possesses a divine order but also maintains an organic cohesion between the verses of a single Surah, as well as between Surahs, both preceding and succeeding each other, and even across distant Surahs. Such interconnections are of such a nature that altering the placement of a verse—whether by shifting it forward or backward, or by adding or removing it—would disrupt the order and coherence of the Surah.

The conceptual framework for this analysis is based on the expanded notion of conceptual and textual cohesion and Contextuality, as proposed by ‘Abdul Ra‘ūf (2003), with a particular focus on the macro level, including intertextual and inter-narrative relationships. The study begins by examining the opening and concluding verses of Surah al-Naml as boundary markers. Following this, the verses related to the four narratives within the Surah—those of Moses, Solomon, Saleh, and Lot—will be analyzed as interconnected segments or boundary stories. The analysis will explore the conceptual and textual chain connections between these stories, emphasizing their thematic and textual cohesion.

5. Discussion and Analysis

Surah al-Naml consists of 93 verses, beginning with the disjointed letters "T, S, Q." These letters serve to signal the revelation of the Quran and characterize it as both a Book of Guidance and a Clear

Book, intended for believers who uphold prayer, give alms, and believe in the Hereafter (verses 1-2). Following this, the Surah turns its attention to those who reject belief in the Hereafter, highlighting how their actions seem appealing to them, which ultimately leads them astray. Such individuals will face severe punishment in the Hereafter, making them among the greatest losers (verses 3-5). The Surah further addresses the Prophet, reassuring him that the Quran has been revealed to him by a Wise and Knowledgeable Lord (verse 6). From verses 7 to 58, Surah al-Naml recounts the stories of four prophets:

- **Moses** (verses 7-14)
- **Solomon** (verses 15-44)
- **Saleh** (verses 45-53)
- **Lot** (verses 54-58)

These narratives are presented in a connected sequence, each illustrating different facets of the divine message: Moses delivering God's signs to Pharaoh, Solomon's wisdom and miracles, Saleh's warning to his people, and Lot's warning to his people regarding the impending punishment. This series forms a coherent unit, emphasizing the themes of accountability, the nature of divine retribution, and the salvation of the righteous.

Following the narrative section (verses 59 to the end of the Surah), the focus shifts to the Prophet's duties. These verses instruct the Prophet on how he should continue his mission, recite the Quran, and warn the people (verses 91-93). The concluding verses reinforce themes of accountability, divine omniscience, and the inevitable arrival of God's signs.

The structure and coherence of Surah al-Naml illustrate how each segment complements and builds upon the others. Not only does this cohesion exist within the Surah itself, but it also aligns with the broader context of the Quran. The interconnection between the verses, the stories of the prophets, and the Prophet's own mission reveals the organic and coherent nature of the Quranic text, affirming that each component plays a vital role in delivering the overarching message.

5.1) Conceptual and Textual Chains Between the Beginning and End of the Surah

As indicated by the brief introduction to Surah al-Naml, the Surah opens with the disjointed letters "T.S." and refers to the Quran as a "Clear book," emphasizing two secondary pillars of the faith: prayer and charity, along with the primary pillar, the afterlife. It divides humanity into two groups: believers and disbelievers, and further discusses the Quran and God (verses 1-6). The Surah concludes by reaffirming the Prophet's mission to recite the Quran, deliver glad tidings, warn the people, and announce the advent of the Day of Judgment (verses 91-93).

In this context, the opening and closing verses of the Surah are conceptually interconnected. The disjointed letters "T.S." and the phrase "clear book" in verse 1 are linked to "the Quran" in verse 6, with these elements tied together through the recitation of the Quran in the concluding verses. The themes of glad tidings and warnings directed to the two groups—believers and disbelievers—are echoed in the final verses. Additionally, the certainty of the afterlife mentioned in verse 1 is conceptually aligned with the impending arrival of the Day of Judgment in the concluding verses.

Furthermore, as 'Adl (1388) demonstrates, the disjointed letters "T.S." can be interpreted in three ways: as referring to the Prophet, the prostration of gratitude, or the city of Mecca (p. 148). In this interpretation, the "Clear book" of verse 1 alludes to the Prophet, as affirmed in verse 6, with the final verse urging the Prophet to recite the Quran. The prostration of gratitude may refer to the piety of righteous servants toward God, exemplified by Prophet Solomon's thankfulness after observing an ant, or it could point to God's blessings upon His servants, as described in earlier verses.

Interestingly, if the disjointed letters "T.S." are interpreted as referring to a sacred land, it could be seen as referencing several sacred places within the Surah. These include the Holy Valley of *Tuwā* in the story of Moses, the Valley of the Ant in the story of Solomon, and the lands of *Thamūd* and Lot, which became sacred due to the presence of the prophets Saleh and Lot. The land of Sheba,

where the Queen submitted to God's will, could also be considered sacred. In this way, the term "T.S." conceptually connects all the stories in the Surah.

Furthermore, as Sayyid Quṭb (2019) explains, these disjointed letters are integral components of the Surah and the Quran as a whole, and no Arabic speaker can replicate the Quran's unique composition using these letters (p. 84). Sayyid Quṭb interprets the conjunction "and" in verse 1 as a "that" conjunction, meaning "It is this Quran that is the clear book." By adding 'Adl's three interpretations for "T.S." and including the fourth—"The Quran"—the word of God is revealed in the form of the Quran and its verses to the Prophet in two sacred lands: Mecca and Medina. The Quran calls on believers to give glad tidings, warn the disbelievers, ask God, establish prayer, give charity, and believe in the Hereafter. The Quran was revealed to Moses from the burning bush, it was passed down to David and Solomon in their knowledge, it was sent as a letter from Solomon to the Queen of Sheba (a letter beginning with "*Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*," which is also the opening verse of the Quranic Surah), and it was sent to the people of *Thamūd* and 'Ad through the messengers Saleh and Lot. Most importantly, it was revealed to the Prophet and the people of his time, and more broadly, to all of humanity from the past to the present.

Arthur Jeffrey (1924) also associates the disjointed letter "S" with the beginning of Solomon's story and "T" with the word "Bird" (p. 259). In this interpretation, the central theme of Surah al-Naml is the story of Solomon and the special knowledge granted to him by God, including the language of birds. Alan Jones (1962) also confirms that in eight Surahs, including Surah al-Naml, which begin with disjointed letters, the Quran is immediately mentioned, suggesting that these letters are intrinsically linked to the content and message of the Surahs (p. 9). Thus, the disjointed letters "T.S." conceptually link all parts of Surah al-Naml, particularly its stories.

The two groups mentioned at the beginning of the Surah—the believers and disbelievers—can be observed as corresponding to the two groups in the stories of Moses, Solomon, Saleh, Lot, and the

Prophet. Those who accept God's message will be saved, while those who reject it will face destruction. For instance, the Queen of Sheba accepted God's word and believed, while Pharaoh, along with the people of Thamūd and Lot, rejected it and faced destruction. To illustrate the fate of these two groups, the Quran presents two types of stories: those centered on punishment and those focused on mercy. In this way, the conceptual chain between the beginning of the Surah and the stories of Moses, Solomon, Saleh, Lot, and the Prophet continues.

5.2) Conceptual, Textual, and Intertextual/Meta-Textual Linking

If we consider the opening and closing verses of Surah al-Naml as a frame, the middle verses, which predominantly focus on the stories of Moses, Solomon, Saleh, Hūd, the people contemporary to the Prophet, and all of humanity, are situated within this frame. In narratological terms, the main frame is referred to as the embedding frame, while the secondary frame is called the embedded frame. Rimmon-Kenan (1402) refers to this as *mise en abyme* (p. [insert page number]). Each of these embedded frames can, in turn, act as an embedding frame, incorporating other embedded structures, and this process continues recursively.

At the same time, we must not forget that Surah al-Naml itself is embedded within the Makki Surahs, and these, along with the Madani Surahs, are within the larger context of the Qur'an, which contains 114 Surahs. This recursive layering creates a complex and interconnected structure that reflects the holistic nature of the Quranic text.

The following diagram illustrates the layered framing of the verses of Surah al-Naml, showing how the embedding and embedded frames are intertwined:

Main Frame (Primary Frame)

- The opening and closing verses of Surah al-Naml, which act as the main frame:
 - Opening verses
 - Closing verses

Secondary Frames (Embedded Frames)

- The middle verses of Surah al-Naml, which primarily address the stories of the Prophets, the people contemporary to the Prophet, and all of humanity:
 - Story of Moses
 - Story of Solomon
 - Story of Saleh
 - Story of Hūd
 - The people contemporary to the Prophet and all future audiences of the Qur'an

Other Embedded Frames

- Each of the above secondary frames can also act as an embedding frame, continuing the process recursively.

Larger Frames

- Surah al-Naml is embedded within the Makki Surahs.
- The Makki and Madani Surahs are within the larger Qur'an, which contains 114 Surahs.

In this way, within the opening and closing verses of Surah Al-Naml, as the primary embedding frame, four stories are embedded, as follows:

Table 1: Stories of the Prophets in Surah al-Naml

Prophet	Content of the Verses
Moses	Verses 7-44: In this story, Moses, after seeing a fire, approaches it and hears the divine call. He is commanded by God to go to Pharaoh and invite him to monotheism.
Solomon	Verses 15-44: In this story, Solomon has control over the birds, jinn, and humans, and he knows the language of the birds. He sends a letter through the hoopoe to the Queen of Sheba, inviting her to monotheism.
Saleh	Verses 45-53: In this story, Saleh invites the people of Thamūd to worship the one true God, but they disobey, and as a result, they face divine punishment.
Lot	Verses 54-58: In this story, Lot warns his people about immorality and sodomy, but they continue their rebellion, and thus, they face divine punishment.

It seems that God narrates four stories to describe the condition of the two groups, the believers and the disbelievers, mentioned in the opening verses of Surah al-Naml. Three of these stories refer to those who opposed their prophet and were punished: the people of Moses, Saleh, and Lot. We can categorize these as punishment-oriented stories. Among these punishment-oriented stories, there is one that does not speak of punishment but rather highlights God's mercy toward His servants: the story of Prophet Solomon. This story itself contains three sub-stories: the ant, the hoopoe, and the Queen of Sheba.

It is evident that the number of punishment-oriented stories exceeds the mercy-oriented ones. However, upon closer inspection, we see that the story of Solomon is, firstly, itself composed of three sub-stories, making it comparable to the three punishment-oriented stories. Secondly, the story of Solomon spans 30 verses, almost three times the length of the three punishment-oriented stories combined: the story of Moses is 7 verses, the story of Saleh is 8 verses, and the story of Lot is 4 verses.

These three punishment-oriented stories—concerning the people of Moses, Saleh, and Lot—and the three mercy-oriented sub-stories related to Solomon (the ant, the hoopoe, and the Queen of Sheba) share similarities and differences in several ways. Conceptually, they reflect the interplay between divine justice and mercy, illustrating the consequences faced by those who reject God's message, alongside the mercy extended to those who accept and follow it. Textually, the structure and narrative style of these stories demonstrate the Qur'an's method of reinforcing moral lessons through diverse forms of storytelling. Contextually, they are linked by their overarching themes of accountability, divine judgment, and the importance of faith and obedience to God.

In fact, the discussion here centers on how these sections of the narratives are conceptually, textually, and contextually interconnected. They create intertextual and meta-textual relationships with the broader Prophetic tradition and the Qur'an as a whole. This interconnection reflects the Quranic approach to storytelling, wherein

each narrative not only stands as a lesson in it but also contributes to the larger, unified message of the Quran. By examining these stories in relation to one another, we can gain a deeper understanding of the Quranic themes of justice, mercy, and the ultimate fate of humanity, whether they are among the believers or the disbelievers.

5.3) Conceptual and Textual Interconnectedness in Four Stories

The first question that arises is why these specific portions of the lives of the prophets—Moses, Solomon, Saleh, and Lot—are featured in Surah al-Naml, rather than in other parts of the Qur'an. Second, what is the relationship between these narrative fragments and their connection to the broader Prophetic tradition? Third, how can we explain these relationships in terms of their conceptual, textual, and contextual interconnectedness, particularly at a macro level, where verses and fragments interrelate with one another?

These stories are conceptually and textually interconnected in several ways. First, the three stories focused on punishment and mercy are part of the "Book of Clarity" (verse 1), which offers glad tidings to one group (verse 2) and punishment to another (verse 3). Additionally, these stories are revealed to the Prophet, the wise one through whom knowledge is imparted (verse 6). Second, all four prophets are chosen by God for their respective missions: God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, grants wisdom to David and Solomon, and selects Saleh and Lot for their missions. Third, the purpose of each prophet's mission is to call their people to the oneness of God and to confront the disbelievers: Moses invites Pharaoh to embrace monotheism; Saleh calls his people to the worship of one God; Lot warns his people against immorality and calls them to piety; and Solomon urges the Queen of Sheba to acknowledge the oneness of God.

Fourth, all four prophets go to their people with manifest miracles: Moses with his staff and the white hand; Solomon with wealth, power, and supernatural forces including jinn, the wind, and knowledge of the language of birds; Saleh with the she-camel; and Lot with the promise of saving his people from divine punishment. Fifth, all four prophets, by God's command, are tasked with traveling from

one place to another: Moses travels from Midian to Egypt; Saleh leaves the city of *Thamūd*; *Lot* departs from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; and Solomon enters the Valley of the Ants, which is said to be in the Levant and later comes to the kingdom of Yemen.

Sixth, all four prophets face opposition: Moses confronts Pharaoh, who rejects belief and is drowned; Solomon meets the Queen of Sheba, who believes and is saved; Saleh faces nine groups of disbelievers from *Thamūd*, who reject belief and are destroyed; and *Lot* contends with the wicked men of his people, who likewise reject belief and are destroyed. Seventh, except for *Lot*, three of the prophets are associated with animals: Moses with the serpent, Solomon with the ants, hoopoe, and jinn, and Saleh with the she-camel. Eighth, in all four stories, women play a significant role, both positively and negatively: Moses is with his family on his return to Egypt, and in some interpretations, the role of Moses' wife, *Ṣafūrā*, the daughter of Prophet *Shu'ayb*, is highlighted for her assistance; the Torah also emphasizes the support of Moses' wife; Solomon is drawn to the Queen of Sheba, who later believes in his God and becomes a Muslim; Saleh's wife, as inferred from the Quranic verse, is with him when the nine men or groups swear to destroy him and his family; and *Lot*'s wife is destroyed along with the disbelievers.

Therefore, the phrase "*Ahluhū*" (his family) is repeatedly used in these stories, serving as a foundational element that connects these narratives. Ninth, a comparison between the Queen of the Ants, the Queen of Sheba, and the wives of the prophets is noteworthy: In an ant colony, the queen plays the role of leading and guiding the ants, much like the Queen of Sheba leads and guides her people. The survival and prosperity of both the colony and her kingdom depend on her leadership. Ants instinctively follow the queen, while the people of Sheba consult their queen before making decisions, and the queen does not take action without their input (verse 32).

Tenth, it can be inferred that the army of ants, much like Solomon's forces, is highly coordinated, while the army of the Queen of Sheba is strong and valiant, yet they defer to the queen (verse 33). Before her conversion, the Queen of Sheba is part of the disbelievers

(verse 43). Moses and Saleh's wives play supportive roles, helping sustain the missions of Moses and Saleh. In contrast, *Lot's* wife rises in opposition to him, defies God's command, and contributes to the destruction of her people, ultimately perishing alongside them.

Eleventh, just as the ants build their nests with skill and craftsmanship, the people of Moses, Lot, Saleh, and the Queen of Sheba construct their dwellings with stability. Pharaoh resides in magnificent palaces, yet is ultimately overtaken by death. The Queen of Sheba displays her kingdom and wealth, but Solomon, with the help of supernatural forces, moves her throne before her eyes, leading to her belief. Saleh's people live in sturdy stone houses in the mountains, never imagining that these structures could be destroyed. Similarly, *Lot's* people do not foresee their homes being buried. Additionally, the Queen of Sheba mistakenly perceives the palace as a pool of water and reveals her legs, but later realizes that the palace, made of crystal, is far more beautiful, leading to her belief.

Twelfth, just as the Queen of the Ants orders the others to enter their nests to avoid being trampled by Solomon's army, Pharaoh believes he can cross the sea after Moses, but the waves engulf him and his army. Similarly, Saleh's people think they can find refuge in their stone houses, and Lot's people believe they are safe in their homes, only to face destruction despite their confidence in their security

Thirteenth, just as the Queen of the Ants warns the others not to be trampled (*Layuhṭanimukum*), Pharaoh's army is swept away by the waves, as though they are trampled by them. Similarly, Saleh's people are buried under the stones of their sturdy houses, as if trampled, and Lot's people are buried in a rain of clay, as though trampled. This demonstrates that these stories are interconnected on a micro level through the use of this foundational meaning unit.

Fourteenth, just as Solomon, with his knowledge, prevents his army from trampling the ants, Pharaoh's army is consumed by the sea. If we consider the ant colony, which is built from earth and clay and can be easily destroyed with minimal movement or rain, we can draw a parallel: Pharaoh's army perishes in the sea, Saleh's people suffer

from a rain of stones from the sky, and Lot's people are buried under a rain of clay. The phrase "*Layuh̄tanimukum*" effectively reflects these shared meanings, illustrating the interconnectedness of these events.

Fifteenth, in Moses' story, Pharaoh summons the magicians, and ultimately, with his army, he pursues Moses; in Saleh's story, nine men or groups decide to kill Saleh and his family; in Lot's story, it is the men who engage in wickedness. However, male ants mate for reproduction and survival of the colony, while the men of Lot engage in immorality in defiance of God's command. The men of Lot not only fail to contribute to the survival of their community but harm it, leading to its corruption and destruction. Conversely, male ants act out of instinct to preserve the colony, but the immoral acts of Lot's people are the result of personal choices, leading to divine punishment

5.4) Conceptual and Contextual Intertextuality with the Prophetic Biography

At the same time, one must consider the intertextual relationships between these stories and the era, time, and life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The primary audiences for these stories were the people of the Prophet, the first recipients of the Quranic revelations. God recounts these punishment- and mercy-oriented stories as examples to warn and offer hope to the people of the Prophet's time, announcing His mercy while also warning them against the consequences of disobedience. During his more than two decades of prophethood, the Prophet Muhammad faced numerous challenges in guiding his community. Therefore, in His infinite wisdom and knowledge, God recounts the stories of past nations—stories familiar to the people, and at times, like the story of Solomon and the ant, unique to the Quran and not found in other religious texts—to remind them of the fates of those who came before. These stories served as both a warning and a source of glad tidings: if they believed, as the Queen of Sheba did, they would be saved, but if they remained obstinate and opposed God's commands, they would face a punishment far harsher than that of Pharaoh, the Thamūd, or Lot's people.

For this reason, Surah al-Naml, which opens with both glad tidings and warnings for the believers and disbelievers, concludes with several key reminders: the arrival of the Day of Judgment; a lesson from the nations in punishment-oriented stories ("Say: Travel throughout the earth and see how was the end of the criminals" – verse 69); a message to the Prophet not to grieve over the disbelievers (verse 70); the reminder of God's infinite grace towards the people (verse 73); the fact that God is the Knower of the unseen and aware of people's hidden thoughts (verse 75); the certainty of the Day of Resurrection (verse 83); the reminder to believe in God and do good deeds (verses 86-90); and the actions the Prophet should undertake (verses 91-93). Interestingly, each of these final verses, addressed to the contemporaries of the Prophet, is connected in some way to the stories of the prophets and nations mentioned in Surah al-Naml. Thus, in contrast to Dundes' claim, which points only to the similarities between the story of Solomon and the ant and certain global stories, we have highlighted the unique features of the Quranic narration of this story; more importantly, we have discussed how the three mercy-oriented stories related to Solomon are intertextually and structurally connected, both with the stories of the aforementioned prophets (Moses, Saleh, and Lot) in the surah and with the prophetic biography.

Further discussion could focus on the relationships between this surah and its stories with Surah *al-Shu'arā'* and Surah *al-Qaṣaṣ*, which are often considered together in classical exegetical tradition as the "*Ṭawāsīn*" surahs.

6) Conclusion

From the very beginning of the Quran's revelation, Islamic scholars and exegetes have drawn upon various rhetorical sciences to explain the functions governing the Quranic verses and Surahs. One of these sciences is "*Ilm al-Munāsaba*" (the science of coherence), which, utilizing the principles of rhetoric, seeks to identify the relationships, order, and arrangement between the verses and Surahs. However, it appears that without precise linguistic analysis, the science of coherence cannot fully illuminate the formal and content-related aspects of the Quranic verses

and Surahs. In the twentieth century, while retaining attention to traditional rhetorical sciences, new linguistic models have proven more effective in analyzing and explaining both the formal and content-related dimensions of the Quran.

‘Abdul Ra‘ūf is one of the scholars who aim to uncover various facets of Quranic discourse through textual, conceptual, and contextual intertextuality. ‘Abdul Ra‘ūf examines intertextuality at both the micro and macro levels. As seen in Surah al-Naml, there is not only an intertextual relationship between the beginning and the end of the surah but also between the stories within the surah itself. Most importantly, the teachings of this surah and its stories are closely related to the prophetic biography. The table below outlines the conceptual, textual, and intertextual chain of the stories of Noah, Solomon, Saleh, and Lot, and their connection to the prophetic biography:

Table 2. Conceptual and Textual Intertextuality in the Four Stories

Common Elements	Moses	Solomon	Saleh	Lot	Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh)
Struggle against polytheism and idol worship	Struggle against Pharaoh’s idolatry	Promoting monotheism and preventing idol worship	Inviting the Thamūd to abandon idol worship	Struggling against moral corruption and inviting to monotheism	Inviting the people of Mecca and the world to monotheism and fighting idol worship
Guidance and invitation to monotheism	Call to worship the one God	Call to monotheism and justice	Guiding the Thamūd to faith	Call to abandon sin and embrace monotheism	Guiding people to monotheism and faith in God
Struggle against oppression and corruption	Struggle against Pharaoh’s oppression	Implementing justice in governance	Fighting the corruption of the Thamūd	Struggling against the moral corruption of Lot’s people	Fighting against the oppression of the Quraysh and social corruption
Enduring rejection and	Rejection by Pharaoh and	Rebellion by Jinn and	Rejection by the	Severe disobedience	Rejection and resistance

Common Elements	Moses	Solomon	Saleh	Lot	Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh)
disobedience	the Israelites	humans	Thamūd	by Lot's people	from the Quraysh towards Islam
Fate of the righteous and the wicked	Deliverance of the Israelites and the drowning of Pharaoh	Reward for justice and wisdom	Salvation of Saleh and the destruction of the Thamūd	Salvation of Lot and the destruction of his people	Promise of paradise for the believers and punishment for the disbelievers
Miracles and signs from God	The staff and the radiant hand	Understanding the language of birds and control over jinn and humans	The miracle of the she-camel of Saleh	Warning signs for the people of Lot	The miracle of the Quran and other signs

In short, the stories of these prophets share striking similarities with the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in their struggle against polytheism and corruption, their guidance toward monotheism, the enduring rejection they faced, and their calls for justice. However, the analysis of the interrelations of narrative fragments from various prophets within a single surah, as well as the relationship between Surahs—particularly those with similar beginnings and endings, thematic pairings, or complementary relationships—require further exploration. This is especially evident in the work of Farahi (cited in Mir, 1986) in his interpretation of *Tadabbur al-Quran*. Such a nuanced investigation demands deeper analysis in future research. Moreover, the individual or collective punishment- and mercy-oriented stories could be examined through the lenses of narratology or semiotics, a perspective that has already been explored by some scholars and holds great potential for enriching the understanding of these Quranic narratives.

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How to Cite: Horri, A. (2024). Intertextual and Conceptual Chaining in Punishment and Mercy Narratives: A Study of Surah al-Naml, *A Research Journal on Qur'anic Knowledge*, 15(58), 73-102. DOI: 10.22054/rjqk.2024.81005.2998



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