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# The Semantics of Gratitude (*Shukr*) in the Qurʾān

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## Abstract

Since the publication of Toshihiko Izutsu's *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Qurʾan* in 1959, scholars of Islam have recognized that gratitude (*shukr*) is central to the ethico-religious worldview conveyed by the Qurʾān. Izutsu further developed this analysis in *God and Man in the Qurʾan* and *Ethico-Religious concepts in the Qurʾan*. Ida Zilio-Grade enhances our understanding by providing linguistic analysis of *shukr*, and Atif Khalil examines the understanding of *shukr* in Sufi texts. This paper draws the connections between these three approaches. It expands upon Zilio-Grade's linguistic analysis by examining the root *sh-k-r* and analyzing the differences between the uses of *shākīr* (thankful) and *shakūr* (ever-grateful) when used in relation to the human being and when used in relation to God. It then demonstrates that expanding the analysis of contextual semantic fields employed by Izutsu to include intertextual semantic fields reveals how *shukr* is related to the cognitive faculties of the human being. The paper concludes by examining how authors such as a-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), al-Tilimsānī (d. 773/1291), and Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1230/1815) addressed the paradoxes to which this Qurʾānic presentation of *shukr* gives rise.

## Keywords

Gratitude – Qurʾān – semantics – Sufism – metaphysics

## دلالات مفهوم الشكر في القرآن

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### الخلاصة

مُنذ نشر كتاب "بنية المصطلحات الأخلاقية في القرآن" لتوشيهيكو إيزوتسو في عام 1959، أدرك علماء الإسلام أن مفهوم الشكر يلعب دوراً محورياً في الرؤية الأخلاقية-الدينية للعالم، والتي يبلغها القرآن. ثم طور إيزوتسو تحليله لاحقاً في "الله والإنسان في القرآن"، و"المفاهيم الأخلاقية-الدينية في القرآن". وقد عززت إيدا زيليو-غراندي فهمنا من خلال توفيرها تحليلاً لغوياً لمفهوم الشكر، ثم قام بعد ذلك عاطف خليل ببحث عن استعمال مفهوم الشكر في النصوص الصوفية. يربط هذا المقال بين هذه المقاربات الثلاث، ويضيف إلى تحليل زيليو-غراندي اللغوي، وذلك من خلال تحليل الجذر "ش-ك-ر" وخص الفروق بين استخدام مفردتي "شاكر" و"شكور" عند استخدامهما في العلاقة مع الإنسان، وعندما تُستخدمان في العلاقة بالله. ثم يوضح المقال أن توسيع تحليل الحقول الدلالية السياقية التي استخدمها إيزوتسو لتشمل الحقول الدلالية المتعاقبة نصياً يكشف كيف أن مفهوم الشكر يرتبط بالملكات المعرفية للإنسان. وتتم الورقة بدراسة عن كيفية تعامل علماء مثل الغزالي (ت. 505/1111) والتلمساني (ت. 773/1291) وأحمد التيجاني (ت. 1230/1815) مع المفارقات التي يولدها الطرح القرآني لمفهوم الشكر.

### الكلمات المفتاحية

الشكر - القرآن - الدلالات - التصوف - الغيبيات

In his groundbreaking book, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, Wael Hallaq proposes that Orientalism might be reconfigured to become a "constructive medium" whereby we "can embark on a project of retraining the soul and spirit, in the process cultivating a new ethical technology of the self that will provide a model, an exemplarity, for the rest of the Orientalist's society to emulate" (Hallaq 2018, 257). Addressing Karen Bardsley's observation that the post-Enlightenment conception of nature as mechanical and disenchanting allows little space for gratitude in environmental ethics (Bardsley 2013), Hallaq argues that pre-modern traditions, such as those found in Islam, China, and India, provide more holistic ethical systems that could benefit the contemporary condition by establishing more integral

“technologies of the self.” Addressing the virtue of gratitude raised by Bardsley, Hallaq writes, “gratitude in these traditions is enshrined as an integral part of living life ... It is not a *post eventum* justification or a desperate solution to eminent crisis, but rather a way of conceiving and making sense of the world and of life as it is lived” (Hallaq 2018, 256–7). While Hallaq provides trenchant analysis of the manner in which an ethics grounded in “the subjectivity of the sovereign individual” compromises the virtue of gratitude (Hallaq 2018, 253), he does not provide any analysis of “traditional” conceptions of gratitude to support his broader contention that premodern systems provide alternative, more holistic, concepts of gratitude. Addressing this void, the current paper analyzes the Qur’ānic presentation of gratitude (*shukr*) and the manner in which it has been developed by Muslim scholars. Although scholars such as Toshihiko Izutsu contend that gratitude is a central aspect of the Qur’ānic message and of Islam (Izutsu 2002, 15), it is not a theological or ethical category addressed in a systematic manner by all scholars. One can, nonetheless, find discussions of gratitude in many Qur’ānic commentaries when analyzing verses wherein gratitude is addressed, dictionaries of Qur’ānic terminology, and in the genre of commentaries on *Asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā* (“The Resplendent Divine Names”). This analysis will be grounded in the Qur’ān while employing sources from these genres to flesh out the analysis of the Qur’ānic presentation of gratitude, as well as the extensive analysis of gratitude from Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) *Kitāb al-Ṣabr wa-l-Shukr* (“Book of Patience and Gratitude”) in *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (“Revival of the Religious Sciences”).

Many Qur’ān commentators agree that the very first verse of the Qur’ān after the introductory *basmala*, *al-ḥamdu li-Llāh*, “Praise be to God,” is a manner of expressing gratitude to God. Like commentators before and after him, the Andalusian Qur’ān commentator Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) states that whereas “gratitude” (*shukr*) is given in return for what one has already received, “praise” (*ḥamd*) is given for the qualities of the One Who is praised prior to having bestowed anything and is thus a more universal expression of gratitude (al-Qurṭubī 2001, 1:178–79). Commentators also observe that *praise* in this formula is rendered in the definite, *al-ḥamd*, rather than the indefinite, *ḥamd*, as a way of indicating that all forms of praise and all forms of gratitude belong to God (Lumbard 2015a, 6). From this perspective, Muslims are called upon to begin their five daily prayers by expressing complete gratitude towards God through a formula that they are required to recite seventeen times per day. Furthermore, many Muslims conclude almost every significant licit act with an expression of gratitude, by saying *al-ḥamdu li-Llāh*, “Praise be to God.”

The centrality of gratitude in the Qurʾān has been observed by Toshihiko Izutsu, who writes:

According to the religious teaching of the Qurʾān itself, one of the essential conditions, or rather, the very first step in attaining to the true ‘belief’ or ‘faith’ (*īmān*) is that man should learn to understand the seemingly quite ordinary and common natural phenomena which he observes around him, not as simple natural phenomena but as so many manifestations of the Divine goodness towards him—that is, in Qurʾānic terminology, as so many ‘signs’ (*āyāt*) of God—and be truly thankful to Him for them. The Qurʾān never tires of insisting most emphatically and trying to bring home to man how all the good things which he is enjoying in this earthly life are in reality nothing but God’s gifts. Islam as a religion, in this respect, is an exhortation to gratitude towards God.

IZUTSU 2002, 15

Here Izutsu provides a good summary of the importance of gratitude in the Qurʾānic worldview. His explanation is, nonetheless, hampered by the fact that the Arabic word for gratitude, *shukr*, has a broader semantic range and is more encompassing than what is expressed by the words “thankfulness” or “gratitude” in English. To properly account for the Qurʾānic use of *shukr* a more comprehensive linguistic and semantic analysis is needed. Izutsu limited his study to “contextual semantic fields” that examine the relationship of *shukr* to words that occur in the same passages. The present study demonstrates how dynamic intertextual semantic fields that examine associations found when words occur in similar phrases or the same phrase in different passages of the Qurʾān, reveal additional layers of meaning. In the case of *shukr* it reveals that from a Qurʾānic perspective *shukr* has a cognitive dimension, and that to have *shukr* for the phenomena around us is not only to be aware that they are blessings from God. It is also to be aware of how to use them, and to then use them for their true purpose.

One of the most important aspects of the Qurʾānic presentation of gratitude is that it is considered to be the natural state of the human being and of all existence. From a Qurʾānic perspective, if we look at creation around us, we should understand that everything is a sign of God, as well a gift and blessing from God. Our natural response to these bounties should be *shukr*, which would be both receptive towards the One Who bestows these benefits and active by sharing these benefits with others.<sup>1</sup> As the North African Sufi

1 The burgeoning field of gratitude studies in positive psychology has produced literature that corroborates the Qurʾānic idea that gratitude consists of both accepting graciously and

author, 'Afif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 773/1291), writes regarding the Divine Name *al-Shākir* or "The Grateful":

The reality of the name *al-Shākir* is an all pervading property for everything that is receptive to influence, is influenced by an act, upon which the aim of an actor is accomplished, and in which the intended goal of that which influences [it] manifests. It thus brings together the conventional understanding of gratitude, which is for doing something good (*shukr al-ihsān al-ma'lūm*), and gratitude for the manifestation of bounty (*shukr iẓhār al-minna*), which is being receptive to influence, such as the gratitude of the earth for rain by the appearance of plants and the gratitude of branches for roots by displaying fruits. Thus, the receptivity of the Supreme Pen for replenishment from the unseen is gratitude; the receptivity of the Preserved Tablet for it is gratitude; the natural submission of the spheres to circular motion is gratitude; the commingling of the natural constituents below it by the secret of divine replenishment is gratitude; and the manifestation of minerals, plants and animals from them is gratitude.<sup>2</sup>

AL-TILIMSĀNĪ 2018, 224

In this second aspect of gratitude, existent things doing that which they were designed to do, freely accepting that which they were designed to receive and manifesting that gift, is gratitude. From this perspective, to exist is itself an expression of gratitude, for we receive existence from God and then manifest existence, even if it be in spite of ourselves. As al-Tilimsānī writes,

There is nothing in existence that is devoid of gratitude, even the ingratitude of the ingrate; for his is a gratitude in that what is desired of him in displaying effects is that he be an ingrate. He was influenced by effects and manifested what was desired of him, so he is being grateful, since, were he not displaying effects, he would be associated with nonexistence.

AL-TILIMSĀNĪ 2018, 225

Looking at gratitude in this light brings a deeper understanding to the famous *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muḥammad, who when asked why he exerted himself

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actively implementing what one has been given. For a survey of some research, see Emmons and McCullough 2004. Aspects of Emmons's research are formulated for a less specialized audience in Emmon 2007.

2 I am indebted to Yousef Casewit for reviewing this translation and sharing his forthcoming translation of this text (Casewit 2022).

intensely in supererogatory prayers, weeping and imploring God, though he had already been promised forgiveness (Q 48:1–4), responded, “Shall I not be a grateful servant?” (al-Bukhārī 1998, no. 4836; Muslim 1989, no. 2819). On the one hand, to express gratitude is to be what one is, and the Prophet is ‘Abdullāh, the Servant of God. It is thus in his very nature to spend his nights in supererogatory devotions. As stated in the Qur’ān, worship is the purpose behind the creation of human beings: “I did not create *jinn* and humankind save to worship Me” (Q 51:56). On the other hand, to be grateful is also to fully manifest the blessings that God has provided, and to then share those blessings with others. All of creation is thus in gratitude merely by being that which it is meant to be. This could be understood as passive gratitude. Human beings, however, have the choice to actively participate in gratitude as well.

In this respect, the contemporary Iranian Qur’ān scholar, al-‘Allāma al-Muṣṭafāwī, writes in his twelve-volume dictionary of Qur’ānic terms *al-Taḥqīq fī Kalimāt al-Qur’ān* (“Defining the words of the Qur’ān”),

Gratitude (*shukr*) requires showing kindness and mercifulness and increasing blessing and mercy by carrying out the requirements and obligations realized through the intellect and through revelation by the One Who Bestows Blessings and by His bestowal of blessings, and fulfilling the right of servitude and being provided with the experience of blessings (*al-tana‘um*).

AL-MUṢṬAFĀWĪ 2006, 6:122

To support this understanding, he cites the words of Moses to his people in Q 14:7, “And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, ‘If you give thanks (*la-in shakartum*), I shall surely grant you increase.’” This connection between *shukr* from human beings and increase from God is made in other passages where references to God as *shakūr*, or “ever-grateful,” are preceded by a mention of the increase in blessings that God provides for good deeds, as in Q 42:23: “And whosoever accomplishes a good deed, We shall increase him in goodness thereby. Truly God is forgiving, ever-grateful,” and in Q 64:17: “If you lend unto God a goodly loan, He will multiply it for you and forgive you; and God is ever-grateful, clement, (cf. Q 35:29–30).

Most commentators understand God’s promise to grant increase in Q 14:7 as a reward for gratitude to mean that God grants more blessings in this life and the next (Rustom 2015, 630). In this vein Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) is reported to have said, “Whenever God bestows a blessing upon a servant and he acknowledges it with his heart and praises God for it with his tongue, the blessing does not cease, but that God commands that the servant receive

an increase" (al-Qummī 2014, 2:523). This connection between increase and gratitude is not only found in the Qur'ān, it is in the nature of the root from which *shukr* derives, *sh-k-r*. In its employment of the root, the Qur'ān is in effect relating *shukr* to other words associated with the trilateral root, thereby bringing out the deeper meaning of *shukr*. Manifesting gratitude is in itself a form of increasing the blessings for which one is grateful. As Ida Zilio-Grande observes in her linguistic analysis of *shukr*, "a necessary ingredient of *shukr* is addition, that is increase (*ziyāda*) or multiplication (*muḍā'afa*) of the given amount" (Zilio-Grande 2012, 49). In this vein Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240) writes in his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* ("The Meccan Openings"): "God—glorified and exalted is He—only described Himself as Grateful (*Shākīr*) to us in order for us to increase the work that He has given for which He is grateful to us, that we might increase Him, just as He has increased us in blessing when we are grateful to Him for His blessings and good favor" (Ibn al-'Arabī 2013, 5:276).<sup>3</sup>

As both al-Muṣṭafāwī and Zilio-Grande observe, other words built upon the trilateral root *sh-k-r* demonstrate the connection between increase and gratitude. For example when a tree makes its shade abundant, one says, "the tree became bountiful (*shakīrat al-shajara*)" (al-Muṣṭafāwī 2006, 6:119). The word *shakīr* refers to fresh sprigs that emerge from the trunk of a tree (al-Muṣṭafāwī 2006, 6:119). The emphatic form of *shakara*, *shakūr*, does not necessarily refer to being "oft-grateful" or "ever grateful" as it is often translated, but is used instead to refer to one who is grateful with little. The word *shukūr* is thus used to refer to an animal for whom a small amount of feed suffices. One says of an udder "*ashkara*" when it is full, and one says of a pasture that it is *mashkara* when it is lush (Zilio-Grande 2012, 49). Extrapolating from these various uses of the root *sh-k-r*, al-Muṣṭafāwī writes, "Gratitude (*shukr*) is manifesting the reality of a blessing in accord with the right of the one who bestows the blessing" (al-Muṣṭafāwī 2006, 6:120). One could thus say that when employed with reference to human beings the emphatic form (*ṣiġhat al-mubālagha*) refers to one who, when given a few blessings, does much with them.

## 1 *Shākīr* vs. *Shakūr*

The meaning of the emphatic form is important for understanding the difference between the use of the Divine Names *al-Shākīr*, "The Thankful," and *al-Shakūr*, "The Ever-Grateful," or as indicated above "The One Who is Grateful with Little." Both attributes are employed to refer to God in the Qur'ān: *shakūr*

3 For analysis of Ibn al-'Arabī's treatment of *shukr* in the *Futūḥāt*, see Khalil 2019, 1–25.

(Q 35:30, 35:34, 42:23, 64:17) four times and *shākīr* twice when the text states that God is “thankful, knowing” (*shākīran ‘alīman*, 2:158, 4:147). Each time *shakūr* is given as a Divine attribute it is combined with other attributes that indicate the manner in which God relents unto human beings, by being “forgiving” (*ghafūr*) in three instances (Q 35:30, 35:34, 42:23) and “clement” (*ḥalīm*) once (Q 64:17). According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), the Sunnī theologian who authored one of the most authoritative Qur’ān commentaries in Islamic history, in this formulation the fact that God is *ghafūr* indicates that He forgives human beings in the Hereafter for the praise they gave while in this world, and the fact that God is *shakūr* indicates what He gives them for their praise of Him in the Hereafter (al-Rāzī 2000, 26:25). According to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, that God is *shakūr* means that God “rewards simple acts of obedience by many degrees, and for the work of a few days gives infinite beatitude in the Hereafter” (al-Ghazālī 1971, 114). In this sense, the use of the emphatic form, *shakūr*, is significant because it directly conveys the paucity of acts of obedience and devotion in relation to the infinite rewards that one receives for them. As al-Ghazālī writes, “If you consider the meaning of the increase of the reward, none is absolutely grateful (*al-shakūr al-muṭlaq*) except God, glorious and magnificent, because His increase of the reward is unlimited and unrestricted, since there is no end to the beatitude of paradise” (al-Ghazālī 1971, 114).

There are also important differences between the manner in which the Qur’ān employs *shākīr* and *shakūr* when referring to human beings. *Shākīr* is most often used in the plural to refer to all of humanity or to large groups, such as Q 3:144 and Q 3:145, where at the end of each verse God promises, “We shall reward the thankful (*al-shākīrīn*)”, and Q 6:53, which asks rhetorically, “Does God not know best those who are thankful?” (*a-laysa Llāhu bi-‘alam bi-l-shākīrīn*). In three verses, human beings promise God, “we will surely be among the grateful” (*la-nakūnanna min al-shākīrīn*) (Q 6:63, 7:189, 10:22). In each of these verses, human beings pledge gratitude in response to specific blessings; in two instances gratitude is granted for God rescuing them from a storm at sea (Q 6:63, 10:22), while in the third, they implore God, “If You give us a healthy child, we shall surely be among the thankful” (Q 7:189).

*Shakūr* is not, however, used in relation to specific blessings, nor do human beings refer to themselves as *shakūr* in the Qur’ān. In four verses, when this emphatic form of gratitude is applied to human beings it is joined to the emphatic form of patience, *ṣabbār shakūr* (oft-patient, ever-grateful). Each of these instances refers to those who are able to understand God’s signs. Two verses (Q 14:5, 34:19) refer to people understanding the signs in the stories the Qur’ān narrates and two verses refer to understanding the signs in the created



world. Q 34:19 refers to those who learn from the story of the destruction of Ma'rib, whose people are referred to as "Sheba" in the Qur'ān, and whose complex hydrogeological system, at the heart of which was a massive dam, was destroyed in the third century.<sup>4</sup> It is significant that this is the only instance where the Qur'ān indicates that the destruction of a people provides a sign for the *shakūr*, "those who are grateful with little," since it comes in reference to the people of Sheba who were not thankful for their abundance and were destroyed for having rejected the mercy of God Who had blessed them by making their lives and their wayfaring easy. Regarding their story, the Qur'ān states,

We set between them and the towns that We had blessed, towns easily seen, and We measured the distance between them: "Journey between them in security by night and by day." But they said, "Our Lord, increase the distance of our journeys." And they wronged themselves; so We made them as tales [of old] and tore them completely to pieces. Truly in that are signs for each who is oft-patient, ever-grateful.

Q 34:18–19

In contrast to the story of the people of Sheba, Q 14:5 refers to those who are able to understand the signs that are manifest in the story of Moses leading his people "from layered darkness into light."

We indeed sent Moses with Our signs: "Bring your people from layered darkness into light, and remind them of the Days of God. Truly in that are signs for each who is oft-patient, ever-grateful."

The other two verses that end with *ṣabbār shakūr* refer to those who reflect upon the "ships that sail upon the sea" (Q 31:31, 42:33). These uses of *shakūr* and *ṣabbār* imply that acting in accord with the knowledge acquired from reflecting upon God's signs requires a combination of patience and gratitude. As commentators explain, "Those who are patient when affliction befalls them, which can be seen as times of too much or too little wind, and who are thankful when able to travel with ease, benefit from reflecting upon these signs" (Lumbard 2015b, 1182). Patience and gratitude are thus viewed as complementary, because they pertain to being steadfast when in tribulation and grateful when in prosperity

4 Scholars had previously maintained that the dam was destroyed by a flood between 450 and 540 C.E. But the most recent research regarding the dam at Ma'rib indicates that the entire hydrogeological system of Ma'rib ceased to be used in the third century C.E. (see Francaviglia 2000, 645–653).

and ease (*al-rakhā'*) (Ibn Kathīr 2013, 3:294). More importantly, understanding the subtlety of God's signs and acting in accord with them requires not only gratitude, but also the ability to be grateful with little and that one exhibit the virtue of patience.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Understanding Creation

The verses cited above employ the active participle *shākīr*, "thankful," for those who turn to God and promise gratitude if they are saved from a passing storm at sea (Q 6:63; 10:22), but use the emphatic form, *shakūr* (rendered here as "ever-grateful" to distinguish it from *shākīr*), for those who are able to understand the signs attached to wayfaring upon the sea:

Have you not considered that the ships sail upon the sea by God's blessing, that He may show you His signs? Truly in that are signs for each who is oft-patient, ever-grateful.

Q 31:31

Among His signs are the ships upon the sea like mountains; if He so wills, He stills the wind, and they lie motionless upon its surface. Truly in that are signs for each who is oft-patient, ever-grateful.

Q 42:32–33

Among the many implications of the contrasting uses of *shākīr* and *shakūr* is that there is a difference between being thankful for passing blessings and the gratitude which emerges from reflecting upon and understanding these blessings. The verb *shakara/yashkuru* "to give thanks" or "to be thankful" appears in other phrases whereby it comes to be associated with knowledge and understanding. This connection appears through the inclusion of "a people who are grateful (*qawmun yashkurūn*)" (Q 7:58) among those for whom God "brings forth," "expounds" (*faṣṣala*), or "makes clear" (*bayyana*) His signs.<sup>6</sup> The other people to whom God "expounds" and "makes clear" the realities of His signs in

5 It is interesting that each reference to human beings as *ṣabbār shakūr* (Q 14:5, 17:3, 31:31, 42:33) follows a passage that relates to different ways in which human beings journey upon the earth. One could venture that the implication is that successful wayfaring through this life, both as regards journeying for various worldly purposes and as regards wayfaring successfully towards our final ends, requires a combination of patience and gratitude.

6 The Qur'an also states on several occasions, "Truly in that are signs for a people who believe" (Q 6:99; 16:79; 27:86; 29:24; 30:37; 39:52), and "for a people who hear" (Q 10:67; 30:23). There

the Qur'ān are “a people who know (*ya'lamūn*)” (Q 6:97, 6:105, 7:32, 9:11, 10:5), “a people who understand (*ya'faqahūn*)” (Q 6:98, 30:28; cf. 13:4; 16:12; 30:24), “a people who remember (*yadh-dhakkārūn*)” (Q 6:126), “a people who are certain (*yūqinūn*)” (Q 2:118), and “a people who reflect (*yatafakkārūn*)” (Q 10:24). These associations establish connections that expand our understanding of *shukr* in the Qur'ān and reveal its relation to human attributes that have more intellectual and cognitive connotations. In this context, a “dynamic semantic field” for *shukr* could be diagrammed as follows:<sup>7</sup>

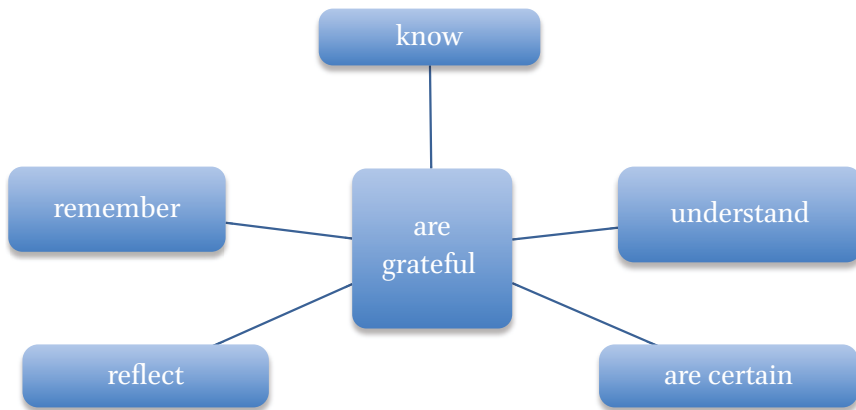


DIAGRAM 1 God’s signs are “expounded” or “made clear” to a people ...

The implication of this dynamic semantic field is twofold. On the one hand, those who reflect, remember, know and understand God’s signs are grateful to God. On the other hand, to reflect, remember, know and understand God’s signs will bring about gratitude. From each perspective, the word *shukr* has more cognitive associations than do the words “gratitude” or “thankfulness.”

Returning to the definitions of the word *shukr* provided by al-Tilimsānī wherein existent things doing that which is desired of them—that which they were designed to do—is considered an expression of gratitude, we could say that the *shukr* of the *shakūr* is to realize what it is that each thing is designed to do, that is to understand its purpose, and to thus be able to facilitate its

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is, nonetheless, an important distinction between a sign being present within something and God having “expounded” or “made clear” the signs.

7 A “dynamic semantic” field is to be distinguished from a “contextual semantic field.” The latter refers to words that often appear in the same passages, as seen above where *ṣabbār* is always connected to *shakūr* when *shakūr* refers to human beings. In contrast, a “dynamic semantic field” refers to associations found when words occur in similar phrases or the same phrase in different passages of the Qur’ān.

increase. As Atif Khalil writes when commenting upon Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *Kitāb al-Ṣabr wa-l-Shukr* in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*,

*Shukr* is to use what one has received from God, or what He has given one power over, wholesomely and beautifully. It is to employ divine favors in a manner which conforms to what God loves, and what He loves, says Ghazālī, is to see everything reach its teleological end. To stand as an obstacle to this attainment, however, lies at the heart of ingratitude. A genuine state of *shukr* therefore involves a deeper appreciation of the wisdom behind the dictates of revelation along with courtesy and propriety towards God's creation.

KHALIL 2016, 170

### 3 Lack of Gratitude

As can be seen from analyzing the root meaning of *shukr* and the broader semantic associations it has in the Qur'ān, true gratitude requires a deeper level of understanding than the fleeting expression of thanks. This is seen in the example of those whom God saves from a storm at sea in Q 6:63 and Q 10:22, who have a moment of what Toshihiko Izutsu refers to as “temporary monotheism” (2002, 106–8). After extolling the *shakūr*—“the one grateful with little” or “the ever-grateful”—in Q 31:31, in Q 31:32 God then excoriates the ungrateful, the *kafūr*, who supplicate fervently when in danger, but then turn away from God after their supplications have been answered,

Yet when waves enshroud them like awnings, they call upon God, devoting religion entirely to Him. Then when He has delivered them safely to land some of them equivocate. And none reject Our signs, save each who is perfidious, ungrateful.

Q 31:32

In this vein, fourteen Qur'ānic verses criticize human beings for their lack of gratitude. While there is some degree of admonition in these verses, the tone is closer to lament. Five of these verses end with the sentence “Truly God is possessed of bounty for mankind, yet most of mankind do not give thanks” (Q 2:243, 12:38, 40:61), or “yet most of them do not give thanks” (Q 10:60, 27:73). The clear implication is that *shukr* is the proper response to God's bounty.

Another verse ends with God lamenting, *lawlā tashkurūn* (Q 56:70), which can mean “yet you do not give thanks,” or “if only you would give thanks.”<sup>8</sup>

Fifteen other verses indicate both God’s desire that human beings be grateful and the doubt that they will be grateful. The Qur’ān follows the mention of many different things—from the blessings of creation, to rites that God has made incumbent upon human beings, to God saving the Muslims from military defeat in two verses (Q 3:123, 8:26)—with the phrase *la’allakum tashkurūn*, “would that you give thanks,” or “that perhaps you may give thanks.” In verses considered to be from the earlier part of the Qur’ānic “revelation,” *la’allakum tashkurūn* occurs after the mention of natural phenomena, as in Q 28:73, “Out of His mercy He made for you night and day, that you may rest therein, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that perhaps you may give thanks,” and in Q 30:46, “And among His signs is that He sends the winds as bearers of glad tidings to let you taste of His mercy, and that ships sail by His command, that you may seek of His bounty, and that perhaps you may give thanks.” In verses considered to be from the Medinan period, the phrase occurs in relation to the rites that God has enjoined Muslims to observe, as in Q 22:36:

And We have placed the sacrificial camels for you among God’s rituals. There is good for you in them. So mention the Name of God over them as they line up. Then when they have fallen upon their flanks, eat of them, and feed the needy who solicit and those who do not. Thus have We made them subservient unto you that perhaps you may give thanks.

In other Medinan verses, *la’allakum tashkurūn* follows injunctions to fast the month of Ramadan (Q 2:185), injunctions to preform ritual ablutions before prayer (Q 5:6), and the discussion of expiations one must make for breaking an oath (Q 5:89). The recurrence of this phrase at the end of such verses indicates that observing such injunctions is a means of expressing gratitude, and that revealing rites of worship and providing specific instructions is among the blessings that God bestows upon humanity. The implication is that just as one should be thankful for the gifts of creation that sustain one’s physical being and provide direction in the material world, so too should one be thankful for the gifts of revelation that sustain one’s “spiritual” being and provide direction towards the Hereafter.

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8 I favor the latter reading, as it conforms to the manner in which the Qur’ān indicates that God desires good and mercy for human beings.

The expression *la'allakum* “would that you” or “that perhaps you may” or “that perhaps you might” is used in conjunction with gratitude fourteen times (Q 2:52, 56, 185; 3:123; 5:6, 89; 8:26; 16:14, 78; 22:36; 28:73; 30:36; 35:12; 45:12), more than any other human quality or outcome for which God expresses desire when addressing human beings in the second person plural. The next most common occurrence of *la'allakum* is followed by *tufliḥūn*, meaning, “that perhaps you may prosper,” which is used eleven times (Q 2:189; 3:130, 200; 5:35, 90, 100; 7:69; 8:45; 22:77; 24:31; 62:10). “That perhaps you may understand (*ta'qilūn*)” (Q 2:73, 242; 6:151; 12:2; 24:61; 40:67; 43:3; 57:17) and “that perhaps you may receive mercy” (Q 3:132; 6:155; 7:63, 204; 24:56; 27:46; 36:45; 49:10) each occurs eight times. *La'allakum* is then followed by *tattaqūn* (be reverent; Q 2:21, 63, 179, 183; 6:154; 7:171), *tahtadūn* (be guided) (Q 2:53, 150; 3:103; 7:158; 16:15; 43:10), and *tadhakkarūn* (“take heed” or “remember”; Q 6:152, 7:57; 16:90; 24:10, 27; 51:49) six times each, twice by *tatafakkarūn* (reflect; Q 2:219, 266), and once by *tuslimūn* (submit, Q 16:81). This reveals another dynamic semantic field regarding the things God states He desires for human beings when in direct discourse with them.<sup>9</sup>

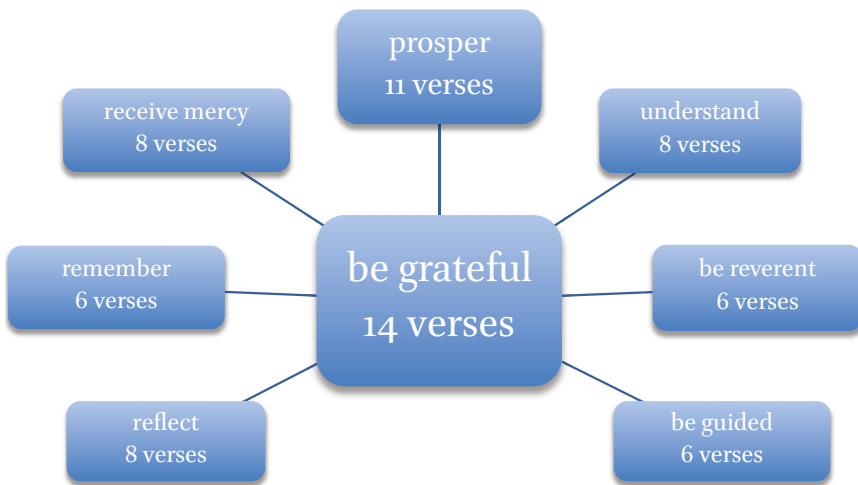


DIAGRAM 2 that perhaps you may ...

9 These verbs are different than the verbs that occur after *la'allahum*, “that perhaps they might” or “that perhaps they may,” although there is also some overlap. An analysis of the implications behind the different verbs used after the second person plural and the third person plural is merited, but is beyond the parameters of this study.

The use of *la'allakum* with these desired outcomes strengthens the link between *shukr* and positive cognitive qualities, such as understanding, remembering, and reflecting, and indicates connections between *shukr* and frequently mentioned religious outcomes, being guided, being reverent, and being open to God's mercy. It is also important to note that these verses indicate God's desire for human beings more than God's admonition of them, much like a mother who laments her child's ingratitude, but does not love the child any less for his or her ingratitude. In this vein, the Qur'ān insists that the gratitude human beings display, like guidance, is not for God's benefit but for their own. As Q 27:40 states, "Whosoever gives thanks, only gives thanks for the sake of his own soul; and whosoever is ungrateful, truly my Lord is self-sufficient, generous." Q 31:12 repeats this concept, but it is preceded by the intimation that gratitude is part of wisdom: "And indeed We gave Luqmān wisdom: 'Give thanks to God!' And whosoever gives thanks, he gives thanks for his own sake. And whosoever is ungrateful, truly God is self-sufficient, praised." As commentators state regarding these verses, "Thankfulness toward God is for one's own benefit, because God gives generously in accord with one's thankfulness toward Him" (Lumbard 2015c, 1002).

Read in the context of the aspects of *shukr* discussed above, the concept that gratitude is to one's own benefit while ingratitude is to one's own detriment reveals several central Qur'ānic concepts to which gratitude is connected on the one hand and to which ingratitude is connected on the other. When speaking of that which is to the direct benefit of human souls, the Qur'ān speaks of those who are rightly guided in four verses (Q 10:108, 17:15, 27:92, 39:41), saying in two of them, "Whosoever is rightly guided is only rightly guided for the sake of his own soul, and whosoever is astray is only astray to its detriment" (Q 10:108, 17:15).

Twice, the Qur'ān states that working righteousness is of benefit to human beings: "Whosoever is righteous, it is for his own soul. And whosoever commits evil, it is to the detriment thereof" (Q 41:46, 45:15). Other qualities which the Qur'ān portrays as being of benefit to "one's own soul" are insight, "whosoever sees clearly, it is to the benefit of his own soul. And whosoever is blind, it is to its detriment" (Q 6:104); being virtuous, "If you are virtuous, you are virtuous for the sake of your own souls, and if you commit evil, thus it is for them" (Q 17:7); and purification, "Whosoever purifies himself only purifies himself for the sake of his own soul" (Q 35:18). In relation to these verses, another dynamic semantic field emerges wherein *shukr* is linked with "right guidance" (*rushd*) "rectification" (*iṣlāḥ*), "clear vision" (*ibṣār*), "virtue" (*iḥsān*), and "purification" (*tazkiya*).

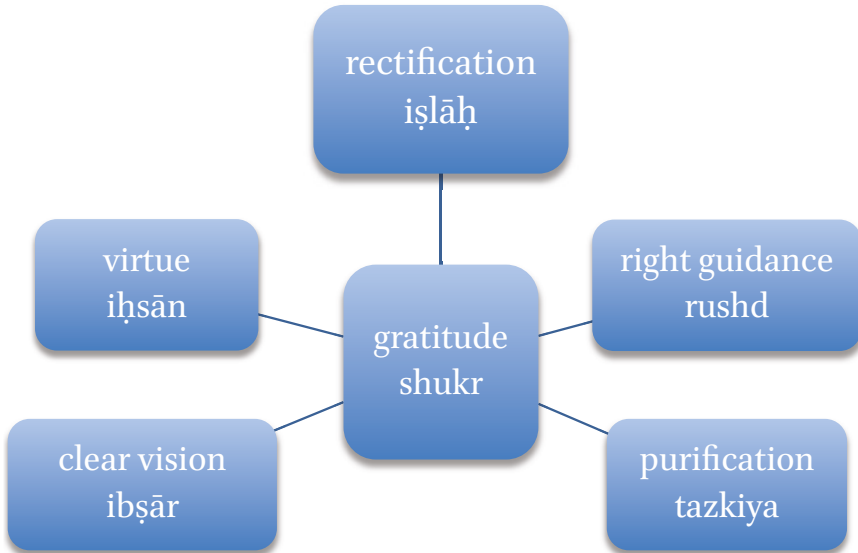


DIAGRAM 3 Attributes that benefit one's own soul

Ingratitude is then linked with being astray (*dalla*), committing evil, and being blind. In two verses, disbelief (*kufṛ*) is also among those things that are of direct detriment to one's soul: "Whosoever disbelieves, his disbelief is to his own detriment" (Q 30:44, 35:39). The most emphatic of the verses that link *kufṛ* to the soul's detriment is Q 35:39:

He it is Who appointed you as successors upon the earth. Whosoever disbelieves, his disbelief is to his own detriment. The disbelief of the disbelievers does not increase them with their Lord in anything but odium. And the disbelief of the disbelievers increases them in nothing but loss.

In the context of discussing *shukr*, it is important to note that the Arabic word employed for "disbelief" is *kufṛ*, which, as Toshihiko Izutsu and others have observed, means "ingratitude" when employed in pre-Islamic Arabic and in the earliest Qur'ānic verses (Izutsu 2004). One could thus translate Q 35:39 as follows:

Whosoever is ungrateful, his ingratitude is to his own detriment. The ingratitude of the ungrateful does not increase them with their Lord in anything but odium. And the ingratitude of the ungrateful increases them in nothing but loss.



#### 4 The Paradox of Gratitude

Analyzing *shukr* by examining the relationships revealed through dynamic semantic fields demonstrates that from a Qur'ānic perspective gratitude is for the benefit of one who is grateful and is desired by God. It is clear that God desires that human beings exhibit gratitude. But when we understand God as absolute and transcendent, human gratitude cannot benefit God the way it might benefit another human being. The Moroccan Sufi, Ibn al-'Arif (d. 526/1141) posits that to conceptualize gratitude as being for God “veils one from Him because it is insufficient to place what you do and say in opposition to His generosity and blessing, and to receive His blessing with your words” (Ibn al-'Arif 2015, 84). Furthermore, if indeed we should be grateful for God's blessings, as Muslim theologians maintain, and if indeed *shukr* itself is something that brings abundant good, then is not *shukr* something for which we should have *shukr*? Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī addresses this issue in *Kitāb al-Ṣabr wa-l-Shukr* in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*:

Know that this observation occurred to David—peace be upon him—and likewise to Moses—peace be upon him. Moses said, “O my Lord, how do I thank You when I am not able to thank You, save through a second blessing from Your blessings” or in another rendering, “when my gratitude to You is another blessing from you, which necessitates thankfulness from me?” God—exalted is He—revealed to him, “When you know this, you have thanked Me.” And in another report [God revealed], “When you know the blessings are from Me, I accept this as a form of gratitude from you”.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ 2013, 7:289

When conceptualized in terms of horizontal gratitude, that is, gratitude from one person to another, this position would appear absurd, almost as if al-Ghazālī were saying that awareness of the impossibility of giving sufficient gratitude to God is the truest form of gratitude or even the only form of gratitude one can have. For al-Ghazālī this means that to truly understand the reality of gratitude one must move from discussions in the realm of interactions (*mu'āmalāt*), where we usually conceptualize such things, to discussions of unveiling (*kashf*), where things can be seen as they truly are.<sup>10</sup> Drawing upon

10 For the distinction between 'ilm al-mu'āmalāt and 'ilm al-kashf in al-Ghazālī's works see Gianotti 2011, 597–613.

knowledge which he claims pertains to the sciences of unveiling, he states that looking at things through “the eye of sheer unity” (*bi-‘ayn al-tawhīd al-mahḍ*)

gives you certain knowledge that He is the One Who is thankful and the One Who is thanked and that He is the Lover and the Beloved. This is the perspective of one who knows that there is nothing in existence other than Him, that “everything perishes save His face” (Q 28:88), and that this is true in every state, always and forever.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ 2013, 7:290

From this perspective, true gratitude requires that one annihilate the ego (*fanā’ al-nafs*), wherein “one is annihilated from oneself and from all that is other than God, such that one sees none but God—Exalted is He” (al-Ghazālī 2013, 7:291). One is then able to perceive through the eye of unity and interact with the things of this world based upon their reality or *ḥaqq*. *Shukr* is then more than a response to God’s munificence. It is a way of drawing closer to God and more fully participating in God’s Will Itself. As we saw above, al-Ghazālī states that using everything for its intended purpose, its teleological end, is gratitude: “All that was created in this world was only created as an instrument for the servant to reach thereby the felicity of the Hereafter and to attain nearness to God” (al-Ghazālī 2013, 7:298). Gratitude then is to use the gifts of God to draw nearer to God, since all human beings are on a path of return to God:

Indeed by gratitude we mean nothing other than expending the blessing of God to proceed in the direction of God’s love. If the blessing is expended to proceed in the direction of love through an act of God, the intention is fulfilled. Your act is a gift from God—Exalted is He. In so far as you are the locus of the act, God praises you and His praise is another blessing from Him to you. He is the One who gives, and He is the One who praises. So one of His acts has become a cause for directing His second act in the direction of His love. Gratitude then belongs to Him in every state.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ 2013, 7:298–99

From this perspective, gratitude is a participation in Being and ingratitude is a negation of Being. Going back to al-Filimsānī, all things necessarily participate in gratitude or *shukr* because all things exist. The one who is grateful actively participates in gratitude by more fully participating in the manifestation of Being and more directly participating in the return to God wherein lies true felicity.

To say that gratitude is only to the benefit of one's own soul, as in Q 27:40 and Q 31:12, is thus to say that the soul blessed with the gift of gratitude is the soul that is more fully participating in Being, and more fully manifesting Being. The soul that is ungrateful or in *kufṛ* is covering over the reality of Being and thus manifesting more indirectly and taking a more circuitous route towards its final end. In this vein Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1230/1815) maintains that *shukr* is a "station of selfless proximity" wherein the Prophet Muḥammad—may God bless and grant him peace—dwells and from which "flow God's favors to the rest of the saints and to creation" (Wright 2005, 149). From this perspective *shukr* is the process of manifesting and continuing these blessings by giving these blessings full recognition for what they are.

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