

**The Wiley Blackwell Companion
to the Qurʾān**

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Edited by Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān

Second Edition

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Preface

Andrew Rippin

The publication of a volume devoted to the Qurʾān in the “companion” genre marks the emergence of the text of Muslim scripture within the canon of world literature in a manner particularly appropriate to the twenty-first century. This companion is explicitly designed to guide the reader who may have little exposure to the Qurʾān beyond a curiosity evoked by the popular media. It aims to provide such a person with the starting point of a general orientation and take him or her to a well-advanced state of understanding regarding the complexities of the text and its associated traditions. However, a “companion” volume such as this is also an opportunity for scholars to extend the boundaries of what might be deemed to be the “accepted” approaches to the text of the Qurʾān because such a volume provides, it is to be hoped, the material which will inspire future generations of scholars who first encounter the Qurʾān in the classroom and for whom new avenues of exploration provide the excitement of research and discovery.

Organization

This companion has been organized in order to facilitate its usefulness for the groups of readers who may wish to embark on a deeper understanding of the Qurʾān in its historical context and as an object of scholarly study. Part I functions as an introduction to the text but its three chapters are oriented in different, yet complementary ways. All readers, but especially those who are coming to the Qurʾān with little foreknowledge of the text and/or the scholarly study of it, will find these chapters the place to start. “Introducing” the Qurʾān (chapter 1) means orienting the reader to the basic facts, themselves coming from a variety of perspectives both internal and external to the text. “Discovering” the Qurʾān (chapter 2) speaks to the experience of a student and considers how one might integrate the Qurʾān within a framework of religious studies. “Contextualizing” the Qurʾān (chapter 3) orients the reader to a Muslim scholarly perspective, putting the

emphasis on the historical context in which the facts about the Qurʾān are to be understood. Each chapter thus adds a level of complexity to the task of approaching the Qurʾān, although each chapter recognizes certain common elements which pose a challenge to the reader, especially the question of the choice of “lens” through which one should read the text.

Part II addresses the text of the Qurʾān on both the structural and the historical level, two dimensions which have always been seen in scholarly study as fully intertwined. Issues of origin and composition lie deeply embedded in all of these concerns because, it is argued, the structure of the text – which is what makes the book a challenge to read – must be accounted for through the process of history. However, the final aim of these attempts at explaining the Qurʾān is directed towards a single end, that of coming to an understanding of the text. The internal structure of the Qurʾān is the focus of chapter 4. These observations are complemented by an intricate series of observations about the nature of the text and its language, including the patterns of address used in the text (chapter 5), language – especially its use of literary figures – in chapter 6, the relationship between poetry and language as it affects the Qurʾān (chapter 7), and the range of the vocabulary of the text that is thought to come from non-Arabic sources in chapter 8. All of these factors – structure, language, and vocabulary – combine and become manifested in the emergence of a text of the scripture within the context of a community of Muslims (chapter 9), creating the text which emerges as sacred through the complex passage of history (chapter 10), which is then transmitted through the generations of Muslims, the focus of chapter 11. All of this happens in a historical context of the early community which is shown to be foundational to the understanding of the text in both the person of Muḥammad and his life (chapter 12) and that of the early leader ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (chapter 13).

Such details provide an understanding of the text on a linguistic and historical level, but the overall nature of its message is fundamentally ignored in such considerations. Part III thus turns to consider some of the major topics which characterize that message. Muslims have, in fact, seen the Qurʾān as all-encompassing in its treatment of human existence and an inventory of themes can really only provide examples of ways of analyzing and categorizing the contents of the scripture: there is little substitute for a rigorous study of the text itself if one wishes to gain a clear sense of what it is really about as a whole. However, certain aspects do provide key ideas and provide the opportunity to illustrate methods of approach. Dominating all of the message of the Qurʾān is, of course, the figure of Allāh, the all-powerful, one God revealed in the Qurʾān just as He is in the biblical tradition (chapter 14), through a process of revelation brought by prophets (chapter 15), three important ones of whom in the Qurʾān are Moses (chapter 16), Abraham (chapter 17), and Jesus (chapter 18). The inclusion of such prophets in the Qurʾān highlights the importance of understanding the biblical background in the Qurʾān (chapter 19) and its references to other religions in general (chapter 20). The message those prophets (including Muḥammad in the Qurʾān) bring argues for belief in God (chapter 21) among reflective, thinking human beings (chapter 22). However, the prophets also bring a message of how life should be lived in both love (chapter 23) and war (chapter 24).

This text of the Qurʾān, as all of the preceding material has made clear, is a complex one that Muslims have always known needed interpretation. This might be said to be the nature of divine revelation, which poses the problem of how the infinity and absoluteness of God can be expressed in the limited and ambiguous format of human language. Such a situation calls for a hermeneutics that is elaborated within the framework of Islam (chapter 25) which can also draw its inspiration from a multitude of sources, always filtered through Islamic eyes and needs (chapter 26). Differing approaches to Islam developed in the Muslim world, variations which the Qurʾān facilitated through its conduciveness to interpretation: thus *ṣūfīs* (chapter 27), two of the most influential of whom were Rūmī (chapter 28) and Ibn al-ʿArabī (chapter 29), Twelver Shīʿites (chapter 30), and Ismāʿīlīs (chapter 31) all sought strength and support for their ideas in the text of the Qurʾān and developed their own principles by which to understand the scripture. Modernity has posed its own distinct challenges that can be seen reflected in changes in the interpretation of the Qurʾān (chapter 32).

However, the Qurʾān has far more significance within Muslim life than as an object functioning as a ground for exegesis. The world of the Qurʾān extends much further, becoming the basis of scholastic consideration and development of learning within the context of exegetical elaboration (chapter 33), theology (chapter 34), and jurisprudence (chapter 35). It is a touchstone for every discussion of ethical issues in the modern world (chapter 36), just as it was the basis for literary development in the classical world (chapter 37). Underlying all of that, however, is the status of the Qurʾān not so much as a rational launching pad for further thought but as a text of devotion, as displayed in the attention to its orality and manifestation in recitation (chapter 38). The application of the Qurʾān thus extends through the many aspects of Muslim day-to-day life.

Technical Considerations

A work such as this depends upon a significant number of scholars interested in making their academic work accessible to a broad reading public and a new generation of students. As editors of the volume, we would like to express our appreciation to all of the contributors – a truly international gathering of scholars – for their efforts. There is a delicate balance in a work such as this between documenting and annotating every thought and being mindful of the variety of readers who are the potential audience; thus, the number of references and endnotes has been drastically reduced but not totally eliminated, for it is in such supporting apparatus that there lies one of the sources of research directions for future generations of scholars. As well, it is notable that there clearly continues to be a need to justify many points of discussion with reference to original and secondary sources; it is perhaps indicative of the still-developing nature of Qurʾānic studies that it is not possible to assume an agreed-upon core of basic data and interpretation that would simplify much of the documentation in a volume such as this.

In an attempt to eliminate some of the “clutter” that is often associated with academic work, the bibliographical references for each chapter have been consolidated into one

overall bibliography at the end of the volume. The exercise of compiling this bibliography has been, for the editors, and for the publisher's copy-editor as well, a task made all the more complex because of the lack of standard editions of many works of constant reference in the field – an aspect aggravated by the loose control over the reprinting of works by different publishers in many parts of the Arab world who make no reference to the source of the original print and who oftentimes use slightly variant page numbering even in direct reprints of a text; thus, for some items in the bibliography, several prints will be listed because those are the ones available to individual writers, and only seldom has it been possible to consolidate different editions. The situation does not exist solely with reprints of Arabic texts in the Arab world, although it certainly afflicts that area far more extensively; the record of the European publishing project of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* is equally complex, although the correlations between the multiple versions of that work are at least somewhat more straightforward. For ease of citation, all references to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* New Edition (= second edition) in this book have been reduced to *EI2* (2004), meaning the CD-ROM version which is a direct reproduction of the printed work in English which appeared in twelve volumes (plus supplements) between 1954 and 2004 (and which is now also available in a Web version). The now emerging third edition appears to be planned under English head words, so no correlation with that edition will likely be possible.

References to the Qur'ān are cited generally in the format "Q *sūra* number:*āya* number," numbered according to what is commonly called the Cairo text. Dates are generally cited in the format "Hijrī/Gregorian" unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

Jawid Mojaddedi

On July 22, 2015, the academic study of the Qurʾān made international headlines due to the announcement of the results of the radiocarbon dating of a manuscript held at the University of Birmingham. The resulting dates (568–645 CE) covered a range that encompasses earlier dates than previously achieved by such methods, including before the traditional date of birth of the Prophet Muḥammad of 570 CE. While the average viewer of this news item might have believed the original manuscript of the Qurʾān had been discovered, or “the one belonging to the first caliph, Abū Bakr” (<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35151643>), informed inquirers found that this radiocarbon dating raised more questions than it answered.

The immediate cause of doubts over the results of this radiocarbon dating, which are always very broad and have been known to fail with documents of verifiable dates of origin, was the graphical evidence, which has been interpreted as pointing to a much later date; it is after all the date of the text that is most important, not the specific date of the parchment, though possibilities of storage or reuse of such material would open further areas of exploration. And, of course, the Birmingham manuscript is not a complete Qurʾān, but just two folios of an estimated 200 in its source. In spite of all these concerns, this discovery nonetheless managed to raise public awareness of the complexities of dating the Qurʾān and also of the many question marks that remain about the history of the Islamic holy text.

If this discovery had been made forty years ago, the opinions of academicians about its historical value may not have diverged so much, neither among themselves nor from the opinions of the widely quoted local Muslim leaders in Birmingham.

However, the academic study of the history of the text of the Qurʾān has transformed considerably in the past four decades, not only with regard to paleography and codicology, but also, in combination with this, through the seriousness with which scholars have attempted to situate the Qurʾān in the wider history of the Near and Middle East. The adoption of the same principles of historical study as used in other fields has enabled a much larger number of scholars than ever before to communicate and collaborate in constructive ways, rather than exceptionalize and thereby isolate the study of the history of Islam.

In view of scholarly preoccupations in recent decades, a whole section, Part II, is devoted to the analysis of the textual structure of the Qurʾān and its history. Among the chapters of Part II there can be found, in addition to the chapters on the Qurʾānic text itself, a chapter on Muḥammad by Herbert Berg. This is because the biography of the prophet of Islam and its relationship to Islamic scriptures is at the center of diverging theories about the history of the Qurʾānic text. It provides the narrative framework for the revelation of the Islamic holy book in traditional understanding, and, through the correspondence of its content with much of the content of the Qurʾān, makes a compelling case for this role. It is therefore not altogether surprising that for most of the history of the academic study of the Qurʾān and the biography of Muḥammad, there was a near consensus about their inseparable historical relationship.

The reason for doubting the traditional understanding of the relationship between the Qurʾān and the biography of Muḥammad is that, while it satisfies theological needs perfectly adequately, the same cannot be said for historical questions. The work of John Wansbrough in the 1970s represents the most important turning point for newer, “revisionist” approaches to this relationship in the quest for more convincing historical answers. For Wansbrough, “prophetic *logia*” (the Qurʾān) were much later exegetically historicized by “the Muḥammadan *evangelium*” (the biography of Muḥammad), and there is no reason for academicians to assume that the two were originally related. Based on the dating of available textual material and through Wansbrough’s influence, the Qurʾān has increasingly come to be seen in the academy as independent in origin from the much later written biography of Muḥammad, while in traditional scholarship they have continued to be treated as inseparable. The *Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān* includes chapters that take a range of differing approaches to this issue, reflecting the diversity of opinion among academicians today.

Pulling away the entire framework that has propped up a structure always has a devastating effect. This case of a framework that has endured for more than a millennium through different intellectual traditions by embedding the Qurʾān within a contemporary life-story is no exception. However, as Wansbrough has put it, “the seventh century Hijaz owes its historiographical existence almost entirely to the creative endeavor of Muslim and Orientalist scholarship” (Wansbrough 1987: 9); the knowledge that remains without this is sparse. As a result, while the study of the Qurʾān adopted rules of the game that correspond to those of historians of other aspects of the Near and Middle East in the same time period, the heavy price to pay for this has been the loss of confidence in accumulated knowledge of generations of scholarship on the history of early Islam that had taken on the assumptions of the faith traditions being studied.

The experience of comparing scholarship on early Islam before the 1970s with that which emerged afterwards among revisionists can be like comparing work on a previously busy and crammed canvas with that on a fresh canvas, where the justification for every brush stroke is more rigorously scrutinized. This is one of the more challenging aspects of more recent scholarship on the history of the Qurʾān, as well as the more startling, for those familiar with traditional scholarship on the subject. In consequence, although the academic study of the Qurʾān is hardly in its infancy, new ways of understanding it have proliferated in recent decades, including ground-breaking works by contributors to this volume.

There is still much research that needs to be carried out, as highlighted by the fact that even a critical edition of the Qurʾān is yet to be prepared. But this is a most exciting field at the present time, and the developments in academic research into the Qurʾān may have an impact eventually on traditional understanding as well, especially since this is a fertile period for new twenty-first-century interpretations of the religion by Muslim reformers. More broadly, the fruits of this research so far, such as through highlighting the consonance and continuities between the Qurʾān and late antique Syriac sources for Christianity, have already been drawn upon increasingly to counter the exceptionalization of Islam by both islamophobic circles and supremacist Muslim factions. As a result, Islam is increasingly seen, both theologically and historically, as another product of the same milieu of Semitic monotheism in the Near and Middle East that also eventually produced the forms of Judeo-Christian traditions that dominate the English-speaking world today.

The fact that it is the Qurʾān that is being studied in this new light means that other fields in Islamic studies are also inevitably being impacted by these developments, since it is of fundamental importance to all representations of Islam. The most obvious example is the study of minority religious traditions that had long been dismissed by mainstream theologians for their belief in the continuation to some degree of divine revelation and prophethood after Muḥammad, with the effect that academicians had also taken on the same prejudices. Seemingly afoul of the basic dogmas of Islam, traditions such as Ṣūfism and Ismāʿīlism had even developed defensive public justifications that ended up being regarded in traditional scholarship as the normative expressions of their traditions rather than apologetics. A more nuanced understanding of the sacralization of the Qurʾān and the development of related dogmas as being the results of a slower process can reveal a much more diverse and historically dynamic range of competing interpretations about revelation and prophethood, especially during the early centuries of Islam. These matters are explored further in the chapters in this volume in Part IV on interpretations of the Qurʾān in minority traditions, and by influential representatives such as Rūmī and Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Whatever interpretation one has of the history of the text of the Qurʾān and its sacralization, there is no doubt about its status in the eyes of Muslims for the documented history of the community. It is also precisely because of its supreme status for them that the changing experiences of the Muslim community over the centuries have necessitated new readings of the Qurʾān. Since the encounter of modernity has had the

most emphatic impact of this kind, the chapters on modern interpretations of the Qur'ān and its usage in the Internet age in this volume are particularly illuminating in this regard.

The increasingly multimedia experience of texts in recent decades has also had the effect of highlighting the aesthetic qualities of the Qur'ān, especially in aural, oral, and visual experience. This arguably redresses the imbalance in much academic study focused on the written text. The chapters in this volume about such qualities are strong reminders of the significance of the primary encounter of the Qur'ān for Muslims in these different dimensions and the aesthetic beauty that has inspired convictions about the Qur'ān's inimitability.

Aesthetic aspects are increasingly highlighted through studies using the latest critical theory and can be experienced more easily than ever through the latest technology, ensuring that they do not become overshadowed by research developments in the study of the Qur'ānic text's early history. They ensure that it will never be difficult to see why the Qur'ān is so revered and treasured by more than a billion people in the world today. The inclusion of these chapters makes the *Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān* not only a resource for accessible introductions based on the latest academic scholarship, but also a very well-rounded volume in its coverage of topics.

The principal editor of this volume, Andrew Rippin, became too ill in Spring 2015 to continue with its preparation, at which point I became involved in its editing. Andrew died on November 29th, 2016. On behalf of all contributors, I would like to dedicate this volume to his memory.

PART I

Orientation

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CHAPTER 1

Introducing

Tamara Sonn

The Qurʾān (“Koran” in archaic spelling) is the sacred scripture of Islam. The term *qurʾān* means “recitation” or “reading,” reflecting the Muslim belief that it is the word of God, not of the prophet who delivered it. Although the Qurʾān was revealed (or “sent down,” *munzal*, as the Arabic term has it) in the first/seventh century, Muslims believe that it is nonetheless timeless, the word of God, revealed word for word in the Arabic language through God’s final messenger, Muḥammad (d. 11/632). Sunnī Muslims (approximately 85 percent of the world’s Muslim population) believe the Qurʾān is therefore uncreated; like God, whose speech it is, it has always existed. The Qurʾān says that its words reflect a divine archetype of revelation, which it calls “the preserved tablet” (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, Q 85:22). This allows for interpretation of the term *qurʾān* as “reading,” even though Muḥammad is described by the Qurʾān as unlettered or illiterate (Q 7:157; 62:2). Rather than “reading” a message, Muḥammad is described as delivering a message that God had imprinted upon his heart (e.g., Q 26:194). At one point the Qurʾān refers to Gabriel (Jibrīl) as the one “who has brought it [revelation] down upon your heart” (Q 2:97). As a result, traditional interpreters claim that Gabriel was the medium through whom Muḥammad received God’s revelation.

The Qurʾān uses the term *qurʾān* seventy times, sometimes generically referring to “recitation” but usually referring to revelation. The Qurʾān also refers to itself, as it does to the Torah and the Gospels, as simply “the book” (*al-kitāb*), a term used hundreds of times to refer to recorded revelation. Muslims therefore frequently refer to the Qurʾān as “The Book.” Muslims also commonly use terms such as “noble” (*al-Qurʾān al-karīm*), “glorious” (*al-Qurʾān al-majīd*), and other terms of respect for the Qurʾān. They commemorate annually the beginning of its revelation on the “night of power”

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(or “destiny,” *laylat al-qadr*), during the last ten days of Ramaḍān, the month of fasting. So important is the revelation of the Qurʾān that the Qurʾān describes *laylat al-qadr* as “better than a thousand months” (Q 97:3).

Muslims’ respect for the Qurʾān is demonstrated by the fact that only those who are in a state of spiritual purity are allowed to touch it. It is the miracle of Islam; Muḥammad brought no other. The Qurʾān tells us that when people asked Muḥammad to demonstrate the authenticity of his prophecy by performing miracles, as other prophets had done, he offered them the Qurʾān. The beauty of its language is believed to be beyond compare, and impossible to imitate. (This belief is conveyed in the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qurʾān, *iʿjāz*.) Whereas Jesus’ life was miraculous and forms the basis of Christianity, the Qurʾān itself is the basis of Islamic life. It forms the core of Islamic ritual and practice, learning, and law.

Structure of the Text

The Qurʾān consists of 114 chapters, called *sūras* (plural: *suwar*). The verses of the chapters are called *āyāt* (singular: *āya*). The chapters range in length from 3 to 287 verses. The first *sūra* is very short, but the remaining *sūras* are arranged roughly in descending order of length, that is, from longest to shortest, rather than in chronological order.

The chronological order in which the chapters were delivered is determined based on both internal evidence and traditional literature concerning the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). Although not all scholars agree on the precise dating of all the verses of the Qurʾān, there is general agreement that approximately ninety of the chapters were delivered during the earlier period of revelation, while Muḥammad and his community lived in Mecca. The remaining chapters were delivered after the emigration (*hijra*) to Medina (1/622). Accordingly, scholars often refer to chapters as being Meccan or Medinan. The former tend to be shorter (and therefore placed at the end of the Qurʾān), poetic in form, passionate in tone, and characterized by general references to monotheism; the glory, power, mercy, and justice of God (Allāh, from the Arabic *al-ilāh*: the [one] god); and the need for submission (*islām*) to the will of God in order to achieve the great rewards promised in the afterlife and avoid divine retribution. The Medinan *sūras* tend to be longer (and therefore found at the beginning of the Qurʾān), more prosaic in form, and deal with more practical issues such as marriage and inheritance.

Each chapter of the Qurʾān has a name, such as “Opening” (Q 1), “Women” (Q 4), and “Repentance” (Q 9). These names were ascribed after the Qurʾān was canonized (established in its authoritative form) and typically derive from major references in the chapters. All but one chapter (Q 9) begins with the phrase “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” Twenty-nine chapters of the Qurʾān are also preceded by a letter or brief series of Arabic letters, whose meaning is unclear. Some scholars believe they refer to elements within the chapter itself, some believe they refer to early organizational components of the chapters, while others believe

they have mystical or spiritual meanings. Whatever their significance, these letters are considered to be part of revelation itself.

Voice and Audience

The Qurʾān often speaks in the first person (“I” or “We,” used interchangeably), indicating that it is the voice of God. For example, as in the verse about the first night of revelation (*laylat al-qadr*) cited above, the Qurʾān says, “Surely We sent it [revelation] down on the night of power” (Q 97:1–2). In this voice, the Qurʾān frequently addresses itself to Muḥammad, instructing him to “say” or “tell” people certain things, sometimes in response to specific issues. For example, when people were doubting Muḥammad’s role as prophet, the Qurʾān instructs him: “Say, ‘O people, indeed I am a clear warner to you. Those who believe and do good works, for them is forgiveness and generous blessing’” (Q 22:49–50). The Qurʾān also offers advice to Muḥammad. When people accused him of being a mere poet or even a fortune-teller, the Qurʾān says, “Do they say that you have forged [the Qurʾān]? Say, ‘If I have forged it, my crimes are my own; but I am innocent of what you do’” (Q 11:35). The Qurʾān also offers encouragement to Muḥammad when his efforts seem futile: “Have we not opened your heart and relieved you of the burden that was breaking your back?” (Q 94:1–2). At other times, the Qurʾān speaks directly to the people about Muḥammad. Concerning the issue of the authenticity of his message, the Qurʾān addresses the community, saying, “The heart [of the prophet] was not deceived. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?” (Q 53:11–12). The Qurʾān is the word of God throughout, but many of the longer verses appear in the voice of Muḥammad, addressing the community with the word of God and referring to God in the third person. For instance, we are told, “There is no compulsion in religion. Right has been distinguished from wrong. Whoever rejects idols and believes in God has surely grasped the strongest, unbreakable bond. And God hears and knows” (Q 2:256).

The audience addressed by the Qurʾān is assumed to be the community of seventh-century Arabia, where Muḥammad lived, although its message is meant for all times and places. Interestingly, and uniquely among monotheistic scriptures, the Qurʾān assumes both males and females among its audience, and frequently addresses the concerns of both. For example, it tells us that God is prepared to forgive and richly reward all good people, both male and female:

Men who submit [to God] and women who submit [to God],
 Men who believe and women who believe,
 Men who obey and women who obey,
 Men who are honest and women who are honest,
 Men who are steadfast and women who are steadfast,
 Men who are humble and women who are humble,
 Men who give charity and women who give charity,
 Men who fast and women who fast,
 Men who are modest and women who are modest,
 Men and women who remember God often. (Q 33:35)

History of the Text

Unlike earlier scriptures, the history of the Qurʾān is well known. The Qurʾān was delivered by Muḥammad to his community in Arabia in various contexts over a period of twenty-two years, 610 to 632 CE. According to tradition, Muḥammad's followers sometimes recorded his pronouncements, while others of his followers memorized and transmitted them orally during his lifetime. After the death of Muḥammad (11/632), and with the deaths of some of those who memorized the Qurʾān (*ḥuffāz*), the prophet's companions decided to establish a written version of the Qurʾān so that it could be preserved accurately for posterity. This process was begun by a close companion of Muḥammad, Zayd b. Thābit (d. 35/655), who collected written records of Qurʾānic verses soon after the death of Muḥammad. The third successor (caliph) to the prophet, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 36/656), is credited with commissioning Zayd and other respected scholars to establish the authoritative written version of the Qurʾān based upon the written and oral records. Thus, within twenty years of Muḥammad's death, the Qurʾān was committed to written form. That text became the model from which copies were made and promulgated throughout the urban centers of the Muslim world, and other versions are believed to have been destroyed. Because of the existence of various dialects, slight variations in the reading of the authoritative versions were possible. To this day seven slightly variant readings remain acceptable, traditionally believed to be of divine origin.

In the modern era, scholarly efforts to critically analyze the history of the text beyond this accepted narrative are highly controversial. This is due to European colonialism throughout the Muslim world, which was often accompanied by critiques of Islam and missionary efforts to convert Muslims into Christians.

The Qurʾān was copied and transmitted by hand until the modern era. Early Arabic lacked vowel markers; in order to avoid confusion, markers indicating specific vowel sounds were introduced into the language by the end of the third/ninth century.

The first printed version was produced in Rome in 1530 CE; a second printed version was produced in Hamburg in 1694. The first critical edition produced in Europe was done by Gustav Flügel in 1834.

The numbering of the verses varies slightly between the standard 1925 Egyptian edition and the 1834 edition established by Flügel, which is used by many Western scholars. (Editions from Pakistan and India often follow the Egyptian standard edition with the exception that they count the opening phrase, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate," of each chapter as the first verse.) The variations in verse numbering comprise only a few verses and reflect differing interpretations of where certain verses end.

The Qurʾān is considered to be authentic only in Arabic. Even non-Arabic-speaking Muslims pray in Arabic, the language serving as a great symbol of unity throughout the Muslim world. Nevertheless, numerous translations of the Qurʾān have been produced. The first Latin translation was done in the twelfth century CE, commissioned by Peter the Venerable, abbot of the monastery of Cluny in France. It was published in Switzerland in the sixteenth century. The Qurʾān is now readily available in virtually all written languages.

Relationship of the Qurʾān to Other Scriptures

The Qurʾān contains numerous references to the earlier monotheistic scriptures, which it identifies as the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels, and assumes people are familiar with those texts. As a result, it does not recount their historic narratives. Instead, the Qurʾān uses characters and events familiar to Jews and Christians to make specific moral or theological points. References to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, and Jesus, for example, therefore appear frequently but not in chronological order.

The Qurʾān refers to the monotheistic tradition as simply “the religion” (*al-dīn*), meaning the monotheistic religion that began with the initiation of the covenant between God and humanity at the time of Abraham (Ibrāhīm). It informs its audience that Muḥammad’s revelation is part of the same tradition: “He has laid down for you as religion what He charged Noah with, and what We have revealed to you, and what We charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus: ‘Practice the religion, and do not separate over it’” (Q 42:13).

The Qurʾān calls upon believers to recognize the religion of Abraham, clearly positioning itself as revelation in the same tradition:

And they say, “Be Jews or Christians and you shall be guided.” Say: “No, rather the creed of Abraham, a true believer; he was no idolater.” Say: “We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender.” (Q 2:135–6; cf: 26:196–7)

Although this monotheistic religion was accurately revealed before the time of Muḥammad, the Qurʾān says that the communities that received those scriptures had become confused about it (Q 42:14). Whether through ignorance or by deliberately distorting the message, many Jews and Christians had fallen into disagreement, each claiming to have the truth. The Qurʾān advises that if they understood their scriptures properly, there would be no dispute and, what is more, they would recognize that the Qurʾān truly confirms what had been revealed before. “This is a blessed scripture We have revealed, confirming that which was before it” (Q 6:92).

The Qurʾān thus presents itself as confirmation and clarification of the true religion of monotheism, the religion of Abraham, which Jews call Judaism and Christians call Christianity but which is really a single tradition. “This Qurʾān narrates to the children of Israel most of what they disagree about. It is a guide and a merciful gift for believers” (Q 27:76–7). Muḥammad is presented as an integral part of the succession of prophets sent by God to reveal the divine will, just as Moses and Jesus were sent before him:

And when Moses said to his people, “O my people, why do you hurt me, though you know I am the messenger of God to you?”...And when Jesus, son of Mary, said, “Children of Israel, I am indeed the messenger of God to you, confirming the Torah that is before me, and giving good tidings of a messenger who shall come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad”; then when he brought them clear signs, they said, “This is sheer sorcery.” (Q 61:5–6)

“Aḥmad” in this passage refers to Muḥammad. Muslims believe that the specific prediction of the coming of Muḥammad was deleted from Christian scriptures or, at least, that the general prediction of someone coming after Jesus (for example, John 16:6–33) has been misinterpreted.

The Qurʾān makes a number of similar clarifications of the previous messages. For example, when Abraham demonstrated his submission (*al-islām*) to the will of God by agreeing to sacrifice his son (the son in question is not identified in the Qurʾān but Muslim interpreters generally agree it was Ishmael (Ismāʿīl), not Isaac (Ishāq), as Jews and Christians believe), his act is described as personal; its reward was not automatically bequeathed to successive generations. Abraham serves as a model for others to follow, but each individual must earn his or her own reward from God by likewise submitting to the divine will:

Those to whom We gave the book and who follow it accurately, they believe in it; and whoever disbelieves in it, they are the losers. Children of Israel, remember My blessing with which I blessed you, and that I have preferred you above all others; and fear a day when no soul shall substitute for another, and no ransom will be accepted from it, nor any intercession will help it, and they will not be assisted. And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them. He said, “I make you a leader for the people.” He said, “And what of my progeny?” He said, “My covenant does not extend to oppressors.” (Q 2:121–4)

Similarly, the Qurʾān corrects those who believe that Jesus is the son of God. The Qurʾān says that Jesus was a great prophet; in fact, he is called “Messiah” (Q 3:45) and the Qurʾān recounts miracles he performed that do not appear in Christian scriptures. But the Qurʾān calls Jesus the “son of Mary,” not the son of God (Q 2:87; 2:253; 3:45, etc.). He was a messenger (Q 4:171). God is the creator of all that exists, the Qurʾān says, not the progenitor of children. Nor is Jesus above being a servant of God (Q 4:171–2). Furthermore, the Qurʾān says that Jesus was not crucified. The Qurʾān says that it only appeared as if he had been killed, but really God “took him up to himself” (Q 4:158).

The Qurʾān also refers to prophets unknown to Jews and Christians. For example, there is a chapter named for an Arab messenger, Hūd (Q 11), who warned his community to follow God, but they rejected him. The same community then rejected another messenger, Šāliḥ, and they were punished with tragedy. As well, the Qurʾān relates the story of the Midianites, who were done away with when they rejected their messenger Shuʿayb. The point of these stories, like that of the people of Lot, is that people who reject the message of God will suffer.

The Qurʾān then confirms that it is the final clarification of the message. Those who accept the message brought by Muḥammad are called “the best community brought forth to people, enjoining good and forbidding evil, and believing in God” (Q 3:110). The “People of the Book” – those who have received the earlier scriptures – will suffer if they reject true prophets. “Some of them are believers,” the Qurʾān claims, “but most of them are sinful” (Q 3:112–13). The Qurʾān is the perfect expression of the divine will; no other is necessary. As the Qurʾān puts it in a verse delivered toward the end of Muḥammad’s life, “Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed

my blessing upon you and approved submission (*al-islām*) as your religion. Whoever is forced by hunger to sin...God is forgiving, merciful” (Q 5:3). Therefore, the succession of prophets ends with Muḥammad. The Qur’ān calls him the “seal of the prophets” (Q 33:40). Yet the fact that the communities of earlier prophets have separated over their interpretations is accepted as the will of God: “If your Lord had so willed, He would have made mankind one community, but they continue to remain divided” (Q 11:118; cf. Q 2:213; 10:19). Now, rather than disputing over doctrine, all who claim to believe should simply “compete with one another in good works.” Muslims believe this message is intended for all people and is sufficient for all time.

Themes of the Qur’ān

As noted above, the Qur’ān is the basis of all Islamic life. It provides guidance concerning worship and ritual, as well as personal piety, and family and community relations. In fact, the Qur’ān frequently refers to itself, as well as the Torah and the Gospels, as “guidance for humanity” (Q 2:185, for example). That guidance turns on a set of interrelated themes. Chief among them are the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) and divine mercy (*rahma*).

The Arabic term for monotheism is *tawḥīd*. Derived from the Arabic term for “one,” *tawḥīd* does not appear as such in the Qur’ān (although other forms of the term do). But it conveys the rich complexity of the Qur’ān’s insistence on the oneness of God. *Tawḥīd* means not only that there is only one God, the god (*al-ilāh*), Allāh, but that God is without partners and without parts. None of the deities worshiped by the Meccans is actually divine, the Qur’ān asserts (see Q 53:19–20), nor is God part of a trinity, as the Christians believe (see Q 4:171; 5:73). But the oneness of God carries further implications in the Qur’ān, particularly in view of modern Islamic thinkers. There is only one God, the creator of all human beings. The one God is also the sole provider, protector, guide, and judge of all human beings. All human beings are equal in their utter dependence upon God, and their well-being depends upon their acknowledging that fact and living accordingly. This is both the will and the law of God. Modern Islamic commentators such as the Egyptian Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), and Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) stress, therefore, that *tawḥīd* implies that society must be ordered in accordance with the will of God. A *tawḥīd*-based society is one in which people devote themselves to serving God by safeguarding the dignity and equality in which all were created. Submission (*al-islām*) to that will is the route to our happiness both in this life and the hereafter.

Thus, *tawḥīd* not only describes God but also commands that humans create a society reflecting the divine will. Demonstrating God’s mercy, the Qur’ān provides the guidance necessary to do that. Although the Qur’ān frequently warns of perdition for those who violate the will of God and vividly describes the scourges of hell, its overriding emphasis is on divine mercy. “The Merciful” (*al-rahīmān*) is one of the most frequently used names of God, equivalent to Allāh (*al-ilāh*). As noted above, all but one chapter of the Qur’ān begin by invoking the name of God, “the Merciful, the Compassionate.” Divine mercy is

often paired with forgiveness. “God is forgiving and merciful” is a common refrain. At times, especially in the early Meccan chapters, the Qur’ān sternly warns people that they ignore its message at their own risk: “Woe to the slanderer and backbiter, who collects wealth and counts it continually. He thinks his wealth will bring him eternal life, but no, he will certainly be thrown into hell” (Q 104:1–5). “Have you seen the one who makes a mockery of faith? He is the one who neglects the orphan, and does not encourage feeding the poor. Woe to those who pray but do so only to impress others. They like to be seen [praying] but [then] do not give charity” (Q 107:1–7). The Qur’ān balances these warnings with expressions of understanding of the weaknesses of human nature: “Indeed, the human being is born impatient. When evil touches him he is anxiety-ridden, and when good things happen to him, grudging” (Q 70:19–21). In this context it offers advice and encouragement:

As for the human being, when God tests him and honors him and blesses him, he says, “My Lord has favored me.” But when God tests him and restricts his livelihood, he says, “My Lord has forsaken me.” No; you do not honor orphans or work for the well-being of the poor, you take over [others’] inheritance and are overly attached to wealth. (Q 89:15–20)

[W]hen you are aboard ships and they sail with a fair breeze and they are happy about it, then a violent wind overtakes them and the waves come from every side and they think they are drowning, then call upon God, practicing religion properly [and saying] if you spare us from this we will be indeed grateful. But when He has rescued them, indeed they begin oppression on earth. O people, your oppression will only hurt yourselves! (Q 10:22–3)

At the same time, the Qur’ān promises mercy and forgiveness. “My mercy encompasses everything” (Q 7:156).

On the day when every soul is confronted with what it has done, good and evil, they will desire a great distance from [evil]. God asks you to beware; God is full of pity for servants. Say: “If you love God, follow me.” God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is forgiving, merciful. (Q 3:30–31)

Thus the Qur’ān describes God’s judgment and mercy as two aspects of divinity, both within the context of the command to submit to the divine will by establishing a just society. The Qur’ān also sets an example for people to emulate and provides specific guidelines for that society. Fair-dealing, honesty, and justice are central: “O Believers, be steadfast [for] God, giving testimony in justice, and do not let a people’s hatred cause you to act without justice. Be just, that is nearer to righteousness” (Q 5:8). “Believers, establish justice, being witnesses for God, even if it [works] against yourselves or against your parents or relatives; regardless of whether [those involved are] rich or poor, God has priority for you” (Q 4:135).

The Qur’ān places particular emphasis on justice and compassion for the most vulnerable members of society. It mentions orphans often, calling for their care and protection. Their well-being is routinely mentioned as the measure of the piety of both individuals and society. For example, the Qur’ān instructs Muḥammad to tell people when they ask about orphans: “Promotion of their welfare is great goodness” (Q 2:220).

True piety is this: to believe in God and the last day, the angels, the book, and the prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to relatives and orphans, the needy, the traveler, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay alms. And those who fulfill their promises, and endure with fortitude misfortune, hardship and peril, these are the ones who are true in their faith; these are the truly God-fearing. (Q 2:177)

The Qur'ān also acknowledges the institution of slavery but says that moral superiority lies in freeing slaves, as well as feeding the hungry and orphans (Q 90:13–16). Freeing slaves and feeding the hungry is enjoined as a way of making up for sins (Q 5:89).

Among the Qur'ān's most detailed legislation is that designed to improve the status of women. The Qur'ān is the only major religious text to acknowledge misogyny and enjoin correctives. For example, the Qur'ān criticizes those who are disappointed by the birth of girls (Q 16:58–9; 43:16–17). It forbids female infanticide, a common practice at the time of Muḥammad. Wives are not to be bought from their families, as they were in many cultures at the time; instead, the Qur'ān stipulates that the bridal gift (dower) be given to the bride herself in an amount to be agreed upon between the bride and groom (Q 4:24). The dower is referred to in the Qur'ān as the woman's wages, indicating that women's work is valuable and should be compensated.

Nevertheless, the marriage relationship is not simply a contract for services. The Qur'ān describes it as mutually beneficial. Spouses are described in the Qur'ān as protective “garments” for one another (Q 2:187; 9:71). Their relationship is to be one of “love and mercy” (Q 30:21). Men are encouraged to be patient with their wives (Q 4:19). Divorce is allowed, but only after two trial separations, during which arbiters are chosen from both families to try to arrange reconciliation (Q 4:35). Then the couple may part, but without rancor, and the husband is required to provide support for the divorced wife, “according to justice, an obligation on those who are righteous” (Q 2:241). A woman may also obtain a divorce if she and her husband agree on a financial consideration (Q 2:228). Overall, the Qur'ān treats women and men as moral equals. It specifies that believing men and women “are protectors of one another. They enjoin good and forbid evil, and observe prayer, give charity, and obey God and his messenger” (Q 9:71). The social structure envisioned by the Qur'ān is unquestionably patriarchal. Women are granted rights “similar to those appropriately over them, but men are one degree higher” (Q 2:229). Similarly, men are considered to be “responsible for women because God has favored some over others and because they spend of their wealth” (Q 4:34). As a result, women must obey their husbands, and men have the right to discipline their wives or even divorce them for disobedience (Q 4:34). Nevertheless, the Qur'ān clearly insists that women, particularly in view of their financial dependency on males, be treated justly.

The Qur'ān stresses that people can be judged only by God and that God will judge based upon their efforts to comply with the divine command to “establish justice.” Those who “believe and do good works,” the Qur'ān states repeatedly, will have nothing to fear in the afterlife; they will be richly rewarded. “Believers, bow down and prostrate yourselves in prayer and worship your Lord and do good deeds, and you will prosper.

And struggle for God as you should struggle” (Q 22:77–8). This struggle “on the path of God” (*fī sabīl Allāh*), as the Qur’ān often puts it, is the root meaning of the term *jihād*. Thus, the Qur’ān presents a challenge to humanity. Using Muḥammad as the model and remembering the forgiveness and mercy of God, people must strive to create a just society. As in the case of past examples, communities as a whole will be judged in history; God does not allow oppressive societies to flourish indefinitely. But individuals will be judged in the afterlife, based upon whether or not they attempted to contribute to this effort:

To God belongs whatever is in the heavens and earth. He forgives whom He will and punishes whom He will. God is forgiving, merciful. Believers, do not consume usury, doubling and redoubling [the amount]. Do your duty to God and you will be successful. Protect yourselves from the fire prepared for disbelievers. And obey God and the messenger, and you will find mercy. And compete with one another for forgiveness from your Lord, and for paradise as great as the heavens and earth, prepared for the righteous. Those who spend in [times of] prosperity and adversity, and those who control their anger and who pardon others; God loves those who do good; and those who, when they commit an offense or wrong themselves, remember God and beg forgiveness for their sins – and who can forgive sins except God – and who do not repeat knowingly what they have done; these are the ones whose reward from their Lord is forgiveness and gardens with rivers flowing beneath, where they will abide, a great reward for those who work. Indeed there have been ages before you, so travel the earth and see what was the end of those who deny [messengers]. This is a clear sign for people and guidance and a warning to the righteous. Do not give up or grieve, and you will certainly prosper if you are believers....And God will make clear those who believe and blot out the disbelievers. Do you think that you will enter heaven without God recognizing those of you who struggle and those who are steadfast? (Q 3:129–42)

Role of the Qur’ān in Islamic Life: Ritual and Art

The Qur’ān is the foundation of all Islamic ritual. It is the source of all prayer and the basis of communal worship. Muslims are required to pray five times daily, at sunrise, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. At each of these times, verses of the Qur’ān are recited in a specified order and number of repetitions (ranging from twice at morning prayer to four times at evening prayer). Extra prayers may be added individually but, again, they are based on the Qur’ān. The weekly congregational prayer (at midday on Fridays) follows the same pattern, although it includes a sermon (*khutba*), often based upon a Qur’ānic theme. As well, devout Muslims read the entire Qur’ān during the holy month of fasting, Ramaḍān. The book is divided into thirty sections for this purpose.

Qur’ān recitation (*tajwīd*) and Qur’ānic calligraphy are the most respected art forms in Islam. Both follow traditional standards developed over the centuries and transmitted from master to student. *Tajwīd* follows set patterns of pronunciation and intonation, characterizing it as chanting rather than singing. Its basic use is to call worshipers to prayer at the appointed times, but “spiritual concerts” (*samā’*) by respected chanters

(*qārī*; plural: *qārī'ūn*) are also common. Such concerts are particularly popular among Muslim mystics (Sūfīs) and those drawn toward spirituality. In addition to its spiritual purposes, the tradition of oral recitation of the Qur'ān has also allowed scholars to be certain of the correct pronunciation of Qur'ānic Arabic.

Muslims display enormous reverence for the Qur'ān. It is still common for young boys to memorize the entire Qur'ān. Such an accomplishment is often marked by great celebration, as a kind of rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Popular Qur'ān chanters can attract great followings and are often invited to open important events in Muslim communities. Many people maintain belief in the miraculous protective power of the words of the Qur'ān itself. It is very common for Muslims to wear verses of the Qur'ān around their necks, and hang beautifully reproduced verses on walls, or have them stitched into fabric, or carved into wood or stone as decorative or architectural elements of their homes or public buildings. Each year during the pilgrimage season, for example, a special cloth embroidered in gold with Qur'ānic verses is created to drape the Ka'ba (the sanctuary in Mecca which is the object of the annual Islamic pilgrimage, the *ḥajj*). Some people believe there are statistical miracles in the Qur'ān, for example, that there are exact equivalences in the mention of opposite terms such as “heaven” and “hell” or “angels” and “devils,” or that the proportion of the number of times the terms “land” and “sea” are used equals the proportion of the earth that is covered by each element respectively.

The Qur'ān in Law

Perhaps the most fundamental use of the Qur'ān in Islamic society is as the basis of Islamic law. As indicated above, the Qur'ān does provide some specific legislation, but it is not essentially a book of legislation. It uses the term “law” or “legislate” only four times. The Qur'ān describes the basic elements of Islamic life, including the essential duties of all believers (the “five pillars” of Islam: bearing witness that there is no God but God, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage). It also prohibits various actions that undermine both personal and social well-being, such as murder, theft, dishonesty, slander, adultery, drunkenness, and gambling. All such specific rulings carry the force of law in Islam. But much of the Qur'ān consists of moral guidance and ideals – such as justice, honesty, charity, mercy, and compassion – rather than specific rulings. Furthermore, the prophet and the community he established are presented as excellent examples of Islamic life (Q 33:21; 60:4–6).

However, during the lengthy historical period of Qur'ānic revelation, from about 610 CE until Muḥammad's death in 11/632, the prophet's community progressed from being a small, marginalized group in Mecca to being the dominant power in the region. As specific historical circumstances changed, so did the Qur'ān's judgment on specific topics. Islamic legislators are therefore presented with a number of challenges. First, they must distinguish between those elements of the Qur'ān that describe specific, changeable historic circumstances, and those that contain eternal principles, applicable in all times and places. As scholars often put it, they must distinguish

between description and prescription in the Qurʾān. For example, as noted above, the Qurʾān treats women and men as moral equals; they share the same religious duties and are equally responsible before God for their efforts in creating a just society. Yet the Qurʾān also claims that men “are a degree higher” in social responsibility, that men are responsible for women, that they may marry up to four women if the women are in need and the men can treat them equally, and that wives must be obedient. Those who seek to replicate the Qurʾān’s example in different times and places must then determine whether or not the Qurʾān’s patriarchy is an ideal (prescription) or simply a reflection of the reality at the time of revelation (description), whose injustices the Qurʾān sought to offset by prohibiting misogynistic practices. Would the insistence on women’s obedience conflict with the Qurʾān’s overall egalitarianism if economic conditions no longer dictated that women were financially dependent upon men?

Islamic legislators must also determine which of the Qurʾān’s often diverse judgments on specific topics carry the force of law and under what circumstances. A common example of such diversity is found in the Qurʾān’s statements about war. In *sūra* 16, Muslims are told that “those who emigrated in God’s cause after they were wronged, We shall surely lodge them in this world in a goodly lodging, and the wage of the world to come is better” (Q 16:41). No advice is given for seeking a redress of grievances. A little later, those who have suffered oppression are told to “call [the oppressors] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice, and dispute with them in the better way....And if you punish, do so as you have been punished; and yet surely if you are patient, it is better for those who are patient” (Q 16:125–6). However, Q 22:39 declares, “Permission is given to those [who fight] because they were wronged; surely God is able to help them.” Similarly, “Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not commit aggression; God does not love aggressors” (Q 2:190). In this instance, retaliation is allowed in cases of self-defense or defense of property. The chapter continues:

And kill [those who fight against you] wherever you find them and drive them out from where they drove you out; persecution is worse than killing. But do not fight them at the holy mosque unless they fight you there. Then, if they fight you, fight them. That is the recompense of unbelievers. But if they stop, surely God is forgiving and merciful. Fight them until there is no persecution and religion is God’s. Then if they stop, there [shall be] no aggression except against the oppressors. (Q 2:191–3)

Islamic legal scholars are therefore presented with a rich and complex array of precedent and advice from which to extract legislation suitable to diverse and ever-changing circumstances.

Principles and Practice of Qurʾānic Interpretation

The Qurʾān itself provides guidance for interpretation. It acknowledges that some verses are more difficult to interpret than others. The Qurʾān describes itself as containing different kinds of verses. The book is entirely from God and it contains the truth and confirms

previous revelations carried in the Torah and the Gospels; it is guidance for people (*hudan li'l-nās*) and a means of distinguishing right from wrong (*al-furqān*). However, in a verse that is among the most difficult of the entire Qurʾān to translate, the Qurʾān says that it contains some verses that are *muḥkamāt* and others that are *mutashābihāt* (Q 3:7). *Muḥkam* (the singular of *muḥkamāt*) can be interpreted as “clear,” “decisive in meaning,” “accurate,” “solid,” “reinforced,” “perfect,” or “well-planned,” among other things. *Mutashābih* (the singular of *mutashābihāt*) can mean “ambiguous,” “indistinct,” or “obscure.” The verse in which these terms are used to describe some verses of the Qurʾān amplifies its meaning, saying that the verses that are *muḥkamāt* are “the mother” or “basis of the book,” while “no one except God knows the interpretation” of the *mutashābihāt*. The Qurʾān does not indicate which verses are which, or how many of each type it contains. This fascinating verse seems to be a caution against excessive confidence among interpreters. It seems to encourage instead the ongoing struggle to elicit inspiration from the Qurʾān.

The Qurʾān’s most specific advice concerning the legislative impact of its content is contained in passages describing its abrogation (*naskh*) of some verses. “Whatever verse we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, we bring one better than that or else one like it” (Q 2:106; cf. Q 16:101; 13:39). Some scholars believe this applies only to the Qurʾān’s abrogation of earlier scriptures, but many believe it applies to verses within the Qurʾān itself. This principle of abrogation has been used, for example, to establish the Islamic prohibition of alcohol, even though the Qurʾān at one point says simply that people should not pray under the influence (Q 4:43) and, at another, only that wine should be avoided (Q 5:90). Nevertheless, the verses which state that drinking wine is a grievous sin whose evil outweighs its usefulness (e.g., Q 2:219) are taken as definitive, superseding the earlier verses because they were delivered later. In other cases, however, such as the verses on oppression, all the verses are applicable, depending upon the circumstances for which people are seeking guidance. In some circumstances, suffering patiently is recommended, such as when those suffering are so weak that rebellion would undoubtedly result in utter defeat, whereas in other cases retaliation or retribution might be an effective means of ending oppression.

In order to determine the applicability of diverse judgments such as these, scholars refer to the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of each verse. The circumstances of revelation are conveyed in reports known generically as *ḥadīth* (plural: *aḥādīth*; sometimes translated as “traditions”). A rich source of the early history of Islam, *ḥadīths* are reports of things Muḥammad said or did, and include things that were said or done in the presence of the prophet and his reaction to them. As noted above, these circumstances assist in dating the various verses, a critical element in determining the applicability of the principle of abrogation. But they also provide the context for various Qurʾānic statements, allowing scholars to define the circumstances in which the various verses carry the force of law.

Since the death of Muḥammad, some of Islam’s most revered scholars have devoted themselves to Qurʾānic exegesis or interpretation in commentaries known as *tafsīr*. Based on detailed study of language, logic, and history transmitted through *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr* attempts (among other things) to provide guidance to Muslim legists in their efforts to derive legislation from the Qurʾān. There are many kinds of *tafsīr*, ranging from traditional verse-by-verse interpretation based on linguistics and history, to

rationalist, legalistic, metaphorical, and mystical. In the modern era, the holistic interpretation – interpreting individual verses of the Qurʾān in terms of the overall moral thrust of the text – has become popular.

The study of the Qurʾān for the sake of determining Islamic law is considered the highest science in Islam (*fiqh*). Relying on *ḥadīth* reports and *tafsīr*, scholars set about the process of deriving legislation from the Qurʾān. But in view of the dynamic nature of society and the fallibility of human judgment, Islamic legislation has never been monolithic. Even though the Qurʾān is considered perfect and applicable for all time, Islam has always tolerated a range of interpretations of its legal implications. By the tenth century, the Muslim community recognized five major schools of Islamic legal thought (*madhāhib*; singular: *madhhab*). Each was named for a major scholar who was believed capable of deriving fresh legal rulings from the Qurʾān and the *sunna*. These were Jaʿfar al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), al-Šāfiʿī (d. 205/820), and Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), producing, respectively, the Jaʿfarī *madhhab* which is dominant among Shīʿī Muslims as well as the Sunnī Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Šāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī schools.

Overall, Qurʾānic legislation is characterized as being of two kinds: those regulations concerning humans' responsibility to God (*ʾibādāt*), and those concerning human beings' interaction (*muʾāmalāt*). The former concern requirements for prayer, charitable giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. The latter deal with all social matters, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, the treatment of orphans and slaves, murder, theft, retaliation, and war. In the Qurʾān, however, these issues are not always separate, as is clear from the popular verse quoted above:

True piety is this: to believe in God and the last day, the angels, the book, and the prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to relatives and orphans, the needy, the traveler, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay alms. And those who fulfill their promises and endure with fortitude misfortune, hardship and peril, these are the ones who are true in their faith; these are the truly God-fearing. (Q 2:177)

Instead of a neat division of duties into those concerned with the divine and those concerned with the mundane, then, the entire world for the Qurʾān is of divine concern, and thus potentially sacred. Indeed, the Qurʾān may be described as charging humanity with the task of sanctifying all aspects of human life by bringing them into accord with the will of God.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 2

Discovering

Christopher Buck

Why the Qurʾān?

The Qurʾān, the holy book of Islam, may well be the most powerful book in human history, with the arguable exception of the Bible. Both in world history and contemporary affairs, it is doubtful that any other book now commands, or has in the past exerted, so profound an influence. Objectively, one of every five people on earth today is Muslim, each of whom subjectively believes that the Qurʾān actually supersedes the Bible, and that it is the Qurʾān – not the Bible – that is unsurpassed. Since Muslims see Islam as the last of the world's religions, they view the Qurʾān as the latest and greatest book. Even if one does not share this view, the sheer magnitude of its influence commands respect, and one cannot be cross-culturally and globally literate today without some understanding of this monumental text. The purpose of this chapter is to inspire and assist readers in discovering the Qurʾān for themselves, with the helpful synergy of insider and outsider – religious and secular – perspectives. This chapter has an added purpose as well, which is to present both historical and contemporaneous argument rationale for inclusion of the Qurʾān in academic curricula.

Academic Study of the Qurʾān

The study of the Qurʾān in an academic setting has raised a number of legal and pedagogical issues in recent decades, some of which have thrust the scripture into the public eye in a way that has not been previously experienced. Of course, religion in general is

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a controversial topic within education, and demands inevitably arise to know why the Qurʾān should (or even can) be taught in a publicly funded university. The situation in the United States, for example, is one that has provoked legal discussions and challenges. Doesn't the study of the Qurʾān in the university violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment? What about the separation of church and state?

These very concerns were raised in US federal courts. A national academic and legal controversy erupted in summer 2002 when the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill required incoming freshmen, as part of its Summer Reading Program, to read and discuss Michael Sells' *Approaching the Qurʾān: The Early Revelations* (Sells 1999). This text – a fresh translation and elucidation of the early Meccan *sūras* of the Qurʾān – was recommended by UNC Islamicist Carl Ernst in order to promote an understanding of Islam, especially in light of the events surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (Buck 2012; Burdei 2002).

Alleging that UNC violated the Establishment Clause and abridged students' rights to religious free exercise by forcing incoming freshmen and transfer students to study Islam against their will, a conservative-Christian activist group, the Family Policy Network (FPN), filed suit in US District Court, Middle District of North Carolina (MDNC), on July 22, seeking a preliminary injunction to keep UNC from conducting its summer program. The case was captioned (named) *Yacovelli v. Moeser* (after James Yacovelli, an FPN spokesman, and James Moeser, UNC Chancellor). When the FPN lost, it immediately appealed to the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, but lost again. This case was widely reported (see Euben 2002), both nationally and internationally, but was not judicially "reported" (that is, the district and appellate decisions were not published).

A later challenge was filed in 2004 but was lost on appeal. Without going into the technicalities of the *Lemon* test, which the Court applied along with the endorsement and coercion tests, the challenge failed. In his decision, Chief Judge N. Carlton Tilley, Jr. ruled:

Approaching the Qurʾān simply cannot be compared to religious practices which have been deemed violative of the Establishment Clause, such as posting the Ten Commandments, reading the Lord's Prayer or reciting prayers in school. The book does include Suras, which are similar to Christian Psalms. However, by his own words, the author endeavors only to explain Islam and not to endorse it. Furthermore, listening to Islamic prayers in an effort to understand the artistic nature of the readings and its connection to a historical religious text does not have the primary effect of advancing religion....A reasonable observer would not believe that the orientation program was an attempt to promote the Islamic faith. (*Yacovelli v. Moeser* [University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill], 2004 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 9152, 42 [M.D.N.C. May 20, 2004], motion granted by, dismissed by *Yacovelli v. Moeser*, 324 F. Supp. 2d 760 [M.D.N.C., July 7, 2004])

This ruling is consistent with the US Supreme Court's endorsement of the academic study of religion in public schools and universities, when Justice Tom C. Clark in 1963 declared that "one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization" (*Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 225 [1963]). It is the secular approach that makes

the academic study of religion constitutionally permissible: “Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment” (ibid.). As Justice Powell later affirmed: “Courses in comparative religion of course are customary and constitutionally appropriate” (*Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 607 [1987]). Based on Justice Clark’s statement as it applies to the Qur’ān specifically, there is support for the position that – in addition to being constitutionally permissible – one’s education is not complete without a study of the Qur’ān (as well as the history of Islam) and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.

How to Read the Qur’ān?

A nineteenth-century mystic once said that the Qur’ān eclipses all of the miracles of all of the previous prophets, for the miracle of the Qur’ān, alone, remains (Shirazi 1950; Lawson 1988). That is to say, the staff of Moses may have turned into a serpent and swallowed up the magicians’ snakes in Pharaoh’s court, but that staff has vanished. Moses may well have parted the Red Sea, as Muslims themselves believe, but that prodigy is long gone. No empirical evidence of either miracle remains today. What alone abides is the “miracle” of the Qur’ān – its prodigious ability to transform the lives of those who believe and accept the Qur’ān as the best guide for their lives. Ideally, this transformation is spiritual alchemy, taking the base appetites that most of us are born with and transmuting these into the pure gold of a refined moral and spiritual character. The Qur’ān can transform a pair of horns into a set of wings, changing the pious believer from a devil into an angel. Such is the nature of Muslim belief about the Qur’ān.

The Qur’ān can and should be taught in the university – not to convert students into pious Muslims, but to convert pious Muslim beliefs into something students can understand, so that they can appreciate the power of the Qur’ān to influence those who believe in it. However, beyond the question of why the Qur’ān should be taught, there is the problem of how it should be taught. In whatever course and context it may be taught, the challenge is to engage readers in the study of this text, to assist them in discovering the Qur’ān for themselves.

Reading the Qur’ān is far easier said than done. The Qur’ān is a challenging text. To the uninitiated, the book is both simplistic and enigmatic. To the untrained eye, the Qur’ān, on first impression, may strike one as arcane, florid, repetitive, or otherwise impenetrable to Westerners wholly unprepared to study the text dispassionately. However, there is a deeper hermeneutical issue involved, one of attitude and assumptions as to the authority and nature of the text.

The Qur’ān makes its own particular truth-claims, which are quite audacious. It tells the reader that its source is an archetypal “mother of the book” (*umm al-kitāb*) in heaven (Q 13:39). The Qur’ān purports to be of divine origin. It is not only authorized, it is actually authored by God Himself, according to the text. This is an extraordinary claim, indeed. As such, from a Muslim perspective, the element of divine revelation is of paramount importance. God wrote the Qur’ān, Muslims believe, and thus the book

Table 2.1 Polarities in the study of the Qur'ān

Western	Muslim
Secular academic	Traditional academic
Analytic	Synthetic
Tendency to over-differentiate	Tendency to harmonize
Use of reason and bias	Use of reason and faith
Sometimes offensive	Sometimes defensive

commands their respect. But should it command the respect of those who, as non-Muslims, might consider offering a course on the Qur'ān in the university? Absolutely. So where does one begin? There are methodological considerations that must first be addressed. The Qur'ān may be a difficult text for non-Muslims, but it is not unfathomable.

The still-predominantly Christian West may have serious misgivings as to the truth of such claims. Isn't the Qur'ān an ersatz version of the Bible – a derivative imitation? This assumption has biased the Western reception of the Qur'ān from the very start, and affected (infected) its study until now. As a result, polarities in the study of the Qur'ān have emerged, although these are beginning to disappear.

The great divide in Qur'ānic studies has historically been the tension between traditional Muslim approaches and Western academic approaches. Although problematic for gaining a coherent understanding and appreciation of the Qur'ān, these two competing paradigms are somewhat synergistic. If you combine the two, you get what Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Smith 1959: 53; but cf. McCutcheon 1999) regarded as the insider–outsider dynamic. In principle, Smith suggested that the best approach to the study of the Qur'ān and Islam is to see the insider's "emic" perspective and the outsider's "etic" vantage as complementary, where subjectivity and relative objectivity interact to the best scholarly advantage. Indeed, Smith's canon of believer intelligibility requires that "no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers" (Smith 1959: 42). This "creative principle" offers the best of both worlds, for it "provides experimental control that can lead" scholars "dynamically towards the truth" (ibid.). However, unless one adheres to Smith's principle, polarities will inevitably arise. Table 2.1 highlights the nature of these polarities.

Table 2.1 shows a complement of productive and reductive approaches. The method of reading largely determines what is read and how it is understood. The Muslim approaches the Qur'ān reverentially and with full faith in the truth it enshrines. The Western secular approach can be just the opposite: it is skeptical and analytic. But it does not have to be. Where there are patent difficulties and even apparent contradictions in the text, the Muslim will try to resolve those anomalies by harmonizing them on a higher plane of understanding, while an individual approaching the text from a secular perspective (the Westerner) may be dismissive of the Qur'ān as simply a human enterprise where inconsistencies and errors are to be expected. Such a conclusion is not

only misguided according to any knowledgeable Muslim, it is also an attack upon the integrity of a sacred text that is divinely revealed.

This concept of the Qurʾān as a revealed scripture is basic to an appreciation as to why Muslims both revere the Qurʾān and orient their entire lives according to its dictates, for the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth* (oral traditions that report the sayings and actions of the Muḥammad) are the two principal sources of authority for Muslim doctrine and praxis. So, to the question of where to begin in discovering the Qurʾān, it only makes sense to start with the concept of revelation.

Revelation and the Abrahamic Faiths

Scholars have long recognized that claims of revelation are central to the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What these faiths have in common is that each is monotheistic. That is, they each preach a belief in a supreme Being, a one-and-only, all-powerful God. According to Alessandro Bausani (1963), monotheism is a conscious revolution against an archaic, pre-monotheistic mind-set. This revolution was not prevalently theoretic but dynamic. It effected a radical shift in the concentration of what some scholars call the *numinosum*, or the locus of the supernatural. Archaic (“primitive” or “primal”) culture is founded on the idea of an anthropocentric correspondence of microcosm and macrocosm, of part-to-whole, as in astrology. In the archaic worldview, the *numinosum* is situated in and around nature, whereas in a monotheistic framework, the *numinosum* is a supreme being, located outside nature. Monotheism disenchants the physical. The nature spirits disappear, ghosts vanish, and the astrological basis of fate and predestination collapses. Experimental science of a pre-modern type could not have been born without the demythologization of nature that monotheism put into motion. By moving God outside of nature, monotheism contributes to the revaluation of the ideas of infinity and the void.

As Bausani notes, this revolution in worldview – disenchanting nature and seeing divinity as its prime mover – gave rise to two major defining features of Western civilization: historicism and technique. The first affects the human sciences; the other impacts the physical sciences. The argument that Islam is one of the unacknowledged roots of Western civilization flows from this historical perspective: Islamic philosophy and science impacted the high medieval and Renaissance cultures to produce Western civilization, especially after the Enlightenment.

Within the monotheist worldview that is central to Islam, the Qurʾān is the literary amber of revelation – the primary mode of disclosure of God’s will for humanity. The Qurʾān speaks of itself as a revealed text. Phenomenologists of religion have identified five characteristics or phenomena typically associated with revelation (Dininger 1987: 356). There are two prime characteristics. (1) *Origin or source*: All revelation has a source – God, or something supernatural or numinous communicates some kind of message to human beings. *Wahy* is the technical term for revelation in the Qurʾān. The fundamental sense of *wahy* seems to be what those steeped in the European romantic ethos would call a “flash of inspiration,” in the sense that it is

sudden and unpremeditated. (2) *Instrument or means*: Revelation is communicated supernaturally, through the agency of dreams, visions, ecstasies, words, or sacred books. *Nuzūl* is a synonym for revelation, but with the explicit notion that the Qurʾān was “sent down” from its archetypal original in the spiritual realm known as the heavens.

Other key phenomena of revelation, all of which the Qurʾān exemplifies, are: (3) *Content or object*: Revelation is the communication of the didactic, helping, or punishing presence, will, being, activity, or commission of the divinity. In this case, the Qurʾān is a revelation from God, pure and simple, communicated through a series of revelations imparted to Muḥammad over the course of twenty-three lunar years. Thus, it would be error and sacrilege to speak of Muḥammad as the “author” of the Qurʾān. (4) *Recipients or addressees*: The Qurʾān itself is a revelation of the universal type. It is a message from God to the world. (5) *Effect and consequence for the recipient*: Revelation transforms its recipient. As the agent of revelation, Muḥammad was commissioned with a divine mission to present the Qurʾān as the voice of God, calling the entire world to righteousness and justice, to morality and decency, and to a life of prayer and fasting, and surrender to the will of God. The fact that Muḥammad was charged with a godly purpose does not make Muḥammad himself divine, as the Qurʾān itself states: “He would never order you to take the angels and the Prophets as Lords” (Q 3:80, Arberry translation). This idea may be seen in an early Christian text: “Neither is there salvation in believing in teachers and calling them lords” (*Homilies* 8:5, in Roberts and Donaldson 1989–90).

How the Qurʾān Was Revealed

With an understanding of revelation generally, the specifics of the revelation of the Qurʾān may now be addressed. Such considerations focus on the person identified as the Prophet of Islam, Muḥammad.

It was Muḥammad’s practice to meditate prayerfully in a cave on Mt. Ḥirāʾ. He was practicing *taḥannuth*, some sort of pious exercise, when he first encountered the archangel Gabriel, who revealed the Qurʾān to him over the next twenty-three lunar years. Tradition is unanimous that Gabriel was the agent of revelation, even though he is mentioned only twice in the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān itself explains how God reveals: “It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or that He should send a messenger and he reveal whatsoever He will, by His leave; surely He is All-high, All-wise” (Q 42:51, Arberry translation). In other words, while the prophet revealed the Qurʾān, it was God who authored it, according to Muslim belief.

The Qurʾān is modeled on an archetypal *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, the “Preserved Tablet” (Q 85:22), having been sent down to the nearest heaven on the “Night of Power” (Q 97) in the holy month of Ramaḍān, in order for Gabriel to transmit it to Muḥammad. The text of Qurʾān is from God, Muslims believe, while the recording and editing of Qurʾān is by men. It is important to understand the implications of the Qurʾān being originally revealed over a period of time, and thereafter collected and edited. Just as the Qurʾān

cannot be read from cover to cover in quite the same way that one reads a novel or treatise, the Qurʾān was not written from cover to cover as well. Just as writers have flashes of inspiration, Muḥammad experienced flashes of revelation. Over time these cumulatively comprised the Qurʾān.

The *ḥadīth* literature provides many anecdotes as to how revelations would come upon Muḥammad. The descriptions vary. The agent of revelation Gabriel taught Muḥammad to recite the first passages of the Qurʾān. Most frequently the accounts speak of revelations “descending” upon Muḥammad such that he would hear the sound of buzzing, or of bells, or would feel a great weight come upon him, or would enter into a trance, after which the words of the Qurʾān would become indelibly inscribed in his heart, and subsequently dictated, then memorized. The revelations of the Qurʾān were first recorded by scribes who wrote down the verses on whatever writing materials were available: leaves and branches of palm trees, white stones, leather, shoulder blades of sheep, ribs.

After Muḥammad’s death in 11/632, there was no authoritative record of the revelations. They had to be collected. The process of assembling, collating, and codifying the Qurʾān was not informed by a great deal of available information as to dating and other historical information on which to base the traditional form that the Qurʾān eventually took. According to tradition, the decision to preserve the Qurʾān was taken after hundreds of reciters were killed in the Battle of Yamāma (12/633). ʿUmar (who was to become the second Caliph) suggested to Abū Bakr that the Qurʾān be collected and written down. Finally, the text was fixed under ʿUthmān, in the dialect of the Quraysh tribe (that of Muḥammad), said to be the clearest of dialects, according to tradition. Where difficulties in establishing the text arose, the dialect of the Quraysh, the tribe to which the prophet belonged, was given preference. Written texts required attestation from reciters, who had heard and memorized the Qurʾān by heart. Thus, the canon of the Qurʾān was fixed as well as the order of the *sūras* and the integrity of the consonantal text.

The urgency with which the text became fixed under the decree of the caliph ʿUthmān afforded precious little opportunity for a systematic, much less scientific ordering of the text. Its preservation was more important than its sequencing, and it was left to later Muslim scholars to provide a critical apparatus for more fully appreciating the pieces that made up the larger whole. How much editing and how intrusive or interpretive such editing may have been is largely a modern question that has occupied much of Western scholarship on the Qurʾān.

Soon after the Qurʾān was revealed, it spread like wildfire, racing with the Arab conquerors during the first two centuries of Arab expansion. The rapidity and breadth of that expansion was dramatic. At this stage, the Qurʾān had not yet achieved its status as a world text, for the simple reason that it was considered an “Arab” book (or, rather, “the” Arab book, since the Qurʾān is the first book in Arabic). Non-Arab converts were at first obliged to attach themselves to various Arab tribes, in a kind of process of spiritual and social adoption. It did not take long before non-Arabs, especially the Persians, took umbrage at this. How could a scripture with a universal message, they argued, be restricted to just a single ethnicity? And, if not, on what grounds were Arabs justified in relegating to non-Arabs a secondary status, when the category of “Muslims”

constitutes a spiritual and social “nation” that embraces all races and nations, yet transcends them? Was not the prophet Abraham a Muslim (“one who surrenders” to the will of God)? And is not anyone who professes belief in the oneness of God and in the authenticity of the prophet Muḥammad to be accounted as a believer, on equal footing with every other? And so it came to be: the appeal to the Qur’ān’s universalisms, expressive of its egalitarian ethic, prevailed. Thus Islam, although based on a message revealed in Arabic, was transposed to other cultures and climes, although it took centuries before the Qur’ān itself was actually translated into other languages. This singular revelation became a universal scripture.

In its final form, the Qur’ān’s 114 *sūras* are arbitrarily arranged by the longest *sūra* first (except for the short “opening” chapter). The traditional dating of these *sūras* has the “early Meccan *sūras*” spanning the first thirteen lunar years (with early, middle, and final periods), shifting to the period of “Medinan *sūras*” in 1/622, coinciding with the first year of the *hijra* or migration of the early Muslim community from Mecca to Medina, followed by the “later Meccan *sūras*” on the prophet’s triumphal return to his oasis-city of Mecca shortly before the end of his life in 11/632.

Taking what has become a classic, two-part division of Muḥammad’s life (Watt 1953, 1956), the early Meccan *sūras* exemplify Muḥammad’s role as “prophet” while the Medinan and later Meccan *sūras* present Muḥammad’s vocation as “statesman.” Thus the earlier revelations are intended to kindle hope and to strike the fear of God into the heart of the hearer by the promise of heaven and the threat of hell. Accordingly, the prophet’s role is that of a “warner” who has come to make people alive to the threat of impending doom and death unless they repent and surrender to the will of God.

First warned, later governed – this is basically the purpose of the revelations and the logic of their sequence. The later Qur’ānic revelations enshrine laws and principles for Muslims to follow. Once a Muslim community had formed (the migration of Muslims to Mecca in 1/622 effectively created the first Muslim state), laws were needed. Accordingly, Muḥammad became a statesman in addition to his role as prophet, and began revealing the laws and ethical principles that later became the foundation for the four Sunnī schools of law and a distinctive way of life.

Sources of Revelation?

Whether the Qur’ān is informed by previous sources is a vexed question. To suggest that the Qur’ān somehow derives from predominantly Jewish or Christian sources is tantamount to discrediting the Qur’ān as a document of revelation. For Muslims, the question should be the other way around. The Qur’ān is the gold standard of divine truth. Since it is pure and unadulterated, it is previous scriptures that should be measured against the Qur’ān, not the other way around. Indeed, the Qur’ān comprehends all previous scriptures:

Within itself, the Qur’ān provides Muslims with a view of the Bible. Mention is made of the “scrolls” of Abraham and Moses, the *Tawrāt* (Torah) of Moses, the *Zabūr* (usually

understood as the Psalms) of David and the *Injīl* (Gospel) of Jesus, all conceived as direct revelation from God to the prophet concerned: “Surely we sent down the Torah wherein is guidance and light” (Qur’ān 5.48); “And we sent, following in their footsteps, Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah before him; and we gave to him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and light” (Qur’ān 5.50). In this way, all previous scriptures are pictured within the revelatory and compositional image of the Qur’ān itself. (Rippin 1993: 250)

To say that Muḥammad was “influenced” by his religious world and that the Qur’ān is a hodge-podge of intermixed influences is not only highly reductionist, but suggests that the prophet was himself the author of the Qur’ān and not God. Surely God had no need to borrow from previous scripture or religious lore, from the Muslim perspective. So the tension between traditional Muslim and Western academic approaches is perhaps nowhere more intense than in discussing this question.

One approach that is both methodologically sound and religiously acceptable is to look at the foreign vocabulary of the Qur’ān and also the religious technical terms and concepts that the Qur’ān mentions. This area of study has proven fruitful for elucidating the text. But then, again, what exactly is being proved? If used as evidence that the Qur’ān is derivative, then this crosses over from a purely descriptive phenomenology into an explanatory phenomenology that is inherently reductive. This latter approach tries to “explain away” the Qur’ān, presenting it as the product of past influences rather than as an original work that absorbs and reconfigures its cultural content to produce an Islamic civilization of world-historical proportions.

For Muslims, the only pre-Islamic source for the Qur’ān is the archetypal “Mother of the Book” of which the earthly Qur’ān is a faithful copy. But Muslim scholars will readily admit that the Qur’ān speaks to its historical-contemporary world, which includes the immediate past. Thus we find specific references to practices from the pre-Islamic period that the Qur’ān explicitly forbids. This is “influence” in the other direction. For instance, the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide was quite common, where parents would bury their infant daughter in the hot desert sand if they thought it too much of a financial burden to raise a girl. So, in this respect, Islam functioned as a women’s protectionist movement. Suffice it to say that knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabia is the natural starting place for developing a fuller understanding of and appreciation for how the Qur’ān represents a significant moral and social advancement over the pre-Islamic “age of ignorance.”

Major Themes of Revelation

History is one thing; meaning is another. Knowing something of the history of the revelation of the Qur’ān and its codification provides a necessary orientation. But the real heart of the Qur’ān is its message. One useful way of approaching the Qur’ān is to see it as the vehicle for expressing profound truths regarding God and the universe, and humankind and its civilizations. God is the creator, and humankind the creative. The themes of the Qur’ān, therefore, are the organizing principles of Islamic religion and

civilization. What follow are several of the major themes of the Qur'ān. Most of the Qur'ān's religious principles are common to the Abrahamic faiths, and many of its morals may be appreciated as universal ethical truths.

Exaltation

From Muslim perception at least, one senses the presence of God in the Qur'ān, which makes it such a powerful text. Since Muḥammad is the revealer, not author, the pious read the text as the voice of God Himself. This is not a mere poetic device, as the voice of God in the Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth's "God's Controversy with New England" (1662). The Qur'ān is the real thing, like a whole book of the Ten Commandments and more. This direct communication of God to man is charged with a power and authority that Muslims feel makes the Qur'ān inimitable, and without peer. No other text can compare with it, except previous scriptures. And rarely are they so direct and compelling. The Qur'ān is a conduit to the presence of God, and to follow the Qur'ān's dictates is to manifest the will of God.

Creation

The Qur'ān accounts for the creation of the world – not as a scientific treatise, but rather as a prophetic narrative. Scholars call this cosmogony. The important thing to remember is that cosmogony often functions as "sociogony" – the genesis of society. Just as God is the creator of the physical universe, the Qur'ān is the great moral and social civilizer of human (Muslim) society, when ideally applied.

Revelation

We have stated earlier that the Qur'ān is a revelation (actually a series of revelations) direct from God. In practice that means that everything the Qur'ān says is taken as truth. This fact is clearly of profound importance in appreciating the status and authority of the Qur'ān. While all of the Qur'ān is God's revealed truth, the Qur'ān does not contain all of God's revelations. The Qur'ān "confirms" the truth of previous revelations, as embodied in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Much of the Qur'ān, in fact, is retrospective. It harks back to the days of previous prophets and relates what became of them and tells of the fate of peoples who rejected and persecuted the warners and messengers that God sent to them. These historical narratives have a didactic (edifying) function. They are homilies on religious history, and thus serve a religious purpose.

With its dire warnings of the day of judgment, the Qur'ān is prospective as well as retrospective. It endows history with teleology – a purpose and a final result. While this teleology is predestined, the individual can largely choose the outcome for his or her

salvation. Here, salvation is not absolution from sin, but a resolution to abide by the will of God. This is true for entire societies as well, since they are aggregates of individuals and families. That is to say, an entire social order can be transformed by following the way of life illuminated by the Qurʾān. Thus, revelation contains within it the seeds of a higher civilization.

And so it happened: Islam reigned as the world's "superpower" during the so-called dark ages of Europe, when great Muslim civilizations exerted a moralizing, philosophical, and scientific influence on the West. Historically, Islam is one of the catalysts that sparked the Renaissance. Ideally, revelation is the genesis of ideal civilization.

Consummation

The Qurʾān is not just one of a series of progressive revelations sent by God to help steer the course of civilization. The Qurʾān literally is the latest and greatest revelation to date. We know this because we are told that Muḥammad is the "Seal of the Prophets" – that is, the final messenger. He has, in a real sense, completed the series of revelations. The Qurʾān is therefore the capstone of God's messages to the world.

Muḥammad's station as the "Seal of the Prophets" is of fundamental importance in Islam. This appellation comes from the famous "seal verse" (Q 33:40). Although interpretations of this key verse did vary in early Islam (Friedmann 1986), there is now a consensus among Muslims that the term "seal" means "last," in the sense of both "latest" and "final." While Muḥammad is considered fully human and not divine (Islam rejects the doctrine of incarnation), this truth-claim, that Muḥammad is the "Seal of the Prophets," easily rivals that of Jesus being the "Son of God." Rather than Jesus being the "Word" of God, for Muslims the Qurʾān is the word of God, literally. That Muḥammad is the "Seal of the Prophets" is a major truth-claim and is effectively non-negotiable. It has achieved the status of a dogma, and one learns not to debate this point with Muslims if friendship is a priority. Accepting Muḥammad as the "Seal of the Prophets" is absolutely fundamental to Muslims everywhere. And this belief is firmly anchored in the Qurʾān itself.

Salvation

For Muslims, salvation consists in much more than simply being forgiven for one's past sins and transgressions. The act of repentance itself effects much of this. Indeed, the true test of one's sincerity is a matter of public record, purely in terms of one's actions. This record is not simply what gets recorded in the proverbial "Book of Deeds," to be read back to each individual on the day of judgment. Rather, pious deeds both manifest and further nurture purity of heart and soul. Here, salvation is active, not passive. One's salvation is a matter of degree, not of status.

But Islam sees a spiritual life beyond forgiveness. Salvation is not a change of status that magically and suddenly averts God's wrath. Salvation is a process, a refinement of

one's character over time. A deeper walk with God on the "straight path" of Islam can come about through spiritual growth and transformation. But how does one do this? What can serve as an infallible spiritual guide? For Muslims, the way to bring one's life into greater conformity with God's will is through following the laws of the Qur'an and the example of Muḥammad. The truest sign of one's transformative faith is conformity and dedication to the principles and teachings of Islam which are preserved, first and foremost, in the Qur'an itself. The single most important act of piety is to surrender one's own will to that of the will of God. The word "Muslim" means "one who has submitted" or surrendered to the will of God. "Surrender" is not the best translation, because following God's will is an act of free will, a vigilant choice, a matter of strength through commitment and practice.

Then what is the will of God? There is a Zoroastrian scripture that states: "The will of the Lord is the law of holiness" (the Ahunwar, the most sacred formula in Zoroastrianism, a common refrain found throughout the Zend Avesta – see Vendidad, Fargard 19, and *passim*). This means that, rather than trying to divine what the will of God is in terms of making important life-decisions, the will of God is not so much what one believes, or what one is, but what one does. What a Muslim believes and what a Muslim does combine to produce what a Muslim is.

Surrendering to the will of God begins with professing one's self to be Muslim, by proclaiming that "There is no god but God" and that "Muḥammad is the messenger of God." As a general rule, Muslims pray more frequently than in any other religion. They also fast longer, for thirty days during the holy month of Ramaḍān (the dates of which annually vary because Islam is based on a lunar calendar). Once one is properly oriented towards God, and is conscious of God throughout the day, it becomes much easier to fulfill one's moral obligations as a pious Muslim. For salvation to be complete, it must be perfected. But salvation is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It is a process of drawing ever nearer to God, which process involves becoming more God-like in one's deeds. Here is where faith and works combine to effect salvation.

Therefore, the requirements of the Qur'an for the true believer may be described, in Christian terms, as a "faith of works." In other words, Islam is ideally a "faith at work" (in Christian terms, a "way of life") and thus a "faith that works" – for the benefit of individual and society alike. If, as Christians often say, "faith without works is dead," the "faith with works" is very much alive. This is the spiritual life that Islam breathes into the physical lives of pious Muslims. Readers may be familiar with the way in which Martin Luther dichotomized faith and works. Individuals would not be "saved" by unaided efforts, but by faith alone. Islam has no such doctrine of salvation by grace. The most efficacious grace is not to give up on the sinner and allow another (Jesus) to die in his place as in Christianity. The better way is to promote the spiritual and moral growth of the individual. This takes discipline as well as a certain amount of faith. Daily obligatory prayer and following the laws and precepts of the Qur'an is the truest salvation by grace, because works and faith combine to become, in the words of the beloved spiritual, "Amazing Grace."

Civilization

Salvation is not just for the individual. There is collective salvation as well. The purpose of the Qurʾān is to communicate God’s will for humankind – all of humanity. Through its laws and moral principles, the Qurʾān is meant to benefit the world through restructuring human society, to infuse it with the consciousness of God and to make it alive to the will of God for human society. It is a call to righteousness and brotherhood, to human solidarity in a community of principle and commonality of values. The Qurʾān is nothing less than an attempt to reorder human society, to rescue it, Muslims would say, from the amoral appetites and turpitude that threaten to make the West morally uncivilized while remaining technologically advanced. Islam offers to fill a spiritual vacuum to which Western society has largely turned a blind eye. Islamic spirituality can be harmonized with the best of Western – Christian as well as contemporary secular – traditions of civic virtues, of moral decency and of family values, informed by the West’s traditional Judeo-Christian ethic. Just as the biblical “Ten Commandments” are still relevant, the Qurʾān still has much to say, although even some Muslims would say that it needs to be understood anew within the changed circumstances of modernity and postmodernity.

Final destination

Few other sacred texts depict the afterlife so vividly as the Qurʾān. Whether literal or metaphorical, Paradise is described as the abode of the righteous, dwelling in peace in Edenic gardens inhabited by dark-eyed damsels that seem to represent higher passions rather than lower ones. Conversely, the Qurʾān portrays Hell in equally graphic terms, as a pit of fire and brimstone, with a descriptive immediacy that the sermons of Jonathan Edwards can scarcely rival. Indeed, it is said that around a full one-third of the Qurʾān is eschatological, dealing with the afterlife in the next world and with the day of judgment here on earth at the end of time. As in Christianity, the day of resurrection plays a prominent role in the Qurʾān with a focus on inevitable moral accountability, both individual and collective in nature. Through promise and threat, the Qurʾān instills a healthy fear of God in the believer, who is constantly taught to respect divine authority and to expect the consequences of one’s own actions.

Reading Revelation

The Qurʾān presents a number of challenges for interpreter and reader alike. Many Western readers have complained that the Qurʾān is dull and repetitive. If the Qurʾān were read as a novel from cover to cover, there might be some truth to this. But just as the Qurʾān was revealed in piecemeal fashion, so also should it be read. The final redaction of the Qurʾān obscures this fact. There are few obvious markers that will signal, to

the untrained eye, the beginning and end of various discrete, revelatory sections known as pericopes. The best examples of a piece of revelation preserved in its entirety and discretely identifiable would be most of what are known as the early Meccan *sūras*.

The Qurʾān was not intended to be read as a book in one or two sittings. The more one reads, the more the reader will have the sense that the Qurʾān repeats itself. Some expressions recur like a refrain. They have a rhetorical purpose, in that they are repeated for stress. The reiterative nature of the Qurʾān notwithstanding, certain passages have achieved such renown that they have come to be known as what al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) referred to as the “jewels of the Qurʾān.” These include such celebrated passages as the “Throne Verse” (Q 2:255) and the “Light Verse” (Q 24:35).

Shifting from the mystical to the perplexing, some Qurʾānic passages defy easy explanation. The most obvious examples are the so-called “mysterious letters of the Qurʾān,” which occur at the very beginning of twenty-nine chapters. Muslims themselves often have a mystical relationship with the Qurʾān that does not require that they understand the text, divine its enigmas, or derive mystical meaning by probing its depths. In popular or “folk” Islam, instead of trying to divine its truths, Muslims may turn to the Qurʾān as a source of divination. One common practice is to consult the Qurʾān as a kind of oracle. If a person wishes to know the solution to a personal problem, he or she can look to the Qurʾān for personal guidance by carefully meditating on the passage that first falls into view.

It is instructive enough simply to be able to see the different modes of discourse that give texture and vitality to the Qurʾān. Although the Qurʾān does not have a definite structure in any kind of systematic method, it has a complex of structures within it. These have been identified in various ways by Muslim and Western scholars alike. One way to discern the various shifts in revelatory content is to perform a genre analysis of a *sūra* or part of a *sūra* in question. The major genres, or the various styles of Qurʾānic revelations, are as follows.

Prophetic revelations

A narrative is simply a story. If the story is true, it qualifies as history. Some narratives have a purely edifying (instructive) function. Whether historically verifiable or not, all of the Qurʾānic narratives are morally true. Prophetic narratives are what they purport to be – stories of the prophets. The Qurʾān has many such narratives. Indeed, the Qurʾān speaks much more about past prophets than about the prophet Muḥammad himself. These narratives, for the most part, are partial, even fragmentary. The only complete prophetic narrative in the Qurʾān is the *sūra* of Joseph (Q 12; Lawson 2012). The nature of these narratives is referential and homiletic. They serve an edifying purpose.

Many of the Qurʾān’s prophetic narratives will no doubt be familiar to readers who are conversant with the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. But some are new – or at least unfamiliar to the general reader who is just discovering the Qurʾān. For many readers, this adds to the Qurʾān’s mystique. Whether such stories are those of

Moses and Khidr (Q 18), the story of the Seven Sleepers (Q 18), or other non-biblical narratives, old and new combine in the Qur'ānic retelling. Take for instance the story of Jesus as a young boy. The Qur'ān states that, as a child, Jesus fashioned a bird from clay, then breathed life into it, and the clay-bird came to life, then flew away:

And He [God] will teach him the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel, to be a Messenger to the Children of Israel saying, "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God." (Q 3:48–9, Arberry translation)

Here, God empowers Jesus to perform the prodigy, in what looks like child's play. In Q 5:110, God reminds Jesus of the wonder wrought. As Qur'ān states, some of its episodes hark back to previous scriptures, some not. The New Testament gospels are silent – no clay, no bird. Pre-Islamic parallels, however, are found in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (where the child Jesus, at five, fashions twelve sparrows from stream-cut clay on a Sabbath day) and the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, which relates much the same story. Though the story is old, it is told anew. Out of narrative clay, the Qur'ān breathes new life into the ancient tale, imbuing it with fresh spirit.

The emphasis is no longer on the power of Jesus, but on the power of God as bestowed on Jesus. This account has undergone a paradigm shift, whereby Jesus is no longer God in person (i.e., God incarnate), but a person of God. Here, the timeworn narrative is timely recreated, conceptually recast, paradigmatically reconfigured. The literary clay, though old, is remolded, with a distinctively Islamic imprimatur. It's the redaction that counts, not the account itself. This is why the Qur'ān defies reduction. The extra-canonical Jesus is canonically Qur'ānic. The apocryphal is now mainstream, the echo resounded yet modified, the meaning revamped, refreshed in a fresh revelation from God. In the process, the renewed and the new coexist, side by side. Old traditions become new revelations.

Edifying revelations

While the majority of narratives are stories of the prophets, other narratives have a purely edifying purpose. The Qur'ān's use of parables and similitudes is especially noteworthy, as the Qur'ān itself says: "Lo! Allah disdaineth not to coin the similitude (*mathal*) even of a gnat" (Q 2:26, Pickthall's translation). Qur'ānic similes, metaphors, extended metaphors, parables, and allegorical vignettes function in much the same way as the parables of Jesus. To state the obvious, these figures of speech are figurative. In other words, they metaphorically say what they mean, but do not literally mean what they say. This distinction is lost on many readers, in fact. Some Qur'ānic parables are straightforward, easily understood, non-controversial, and thoroughly edifying. Other parables are not quite so obvious, even when the Qur'ān explicitly identifies the passage as a parable.

Take, for instance, the Qurʾān's description of Paradise. In the following verse, Paradise is explicitly described as "parable" (*mathal*): "(Here is) a Parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised: in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear. In it there are for them all kinds of fruits; and Grace from their Lord" (Q 47:15, Yusuf Ali's translation). When read together, Q 2:26 and Q 47:15 are simply two examples of the same figure of speech: similitude/parable (*mathal*). In other words, "gnat" (*ba'ūdāt*) and "Garden" (*janat*) are each metaphorical. Paradise is an extended metaphor, functioning allegorically to attempt what is otherwise impossible, i.e., describing a spiritual, otherworldly reality in worldly terms.

Yet this "Parable of the Garden" is typically taken literally. To cite the most well-known example, Paradise beckons with "maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man or jinn," who are "lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral." As if for emphasis, they are further portrayed as "houris, cloistered in cool pavilions," who are "untouched before them by any man or jinn" and "reclining upon green cushions and lovely druggets" (Q 55:56, 58, 72, 74, 76, Arberry's translation). When such figurative descriptions are read as physical figures – highly sexualized virgins – then such promises of Paradise can have hellish results, when used to recruit radical Islamists, jihadists, for instance. But if the celestial "Garden" is explicitly identified as a "parable" – without the need for context-dependent disambiguation – then to read such passages literally is scriptural fundamentalism.

The word *mathal* ("similitude," "comparison," "parable," etc.) occurs 169 times in the Qurʾān. While the meaning of each occurrence of this word is dependent on context, suffice it to say that Qurʾān can be highly figurative. In such cases, it would be a mistake to read those passages literally. In the verses just cited, the ineffable experience of Paradise is one of contentment and reward, using gardens and damsels as earthly analogies.

Maxims, aphorisms, and other wisdom sayings enrich the didactic dimension of the Qurʾān. Ideally, such sapiential discourse influences the lives of Muslims in ways that laws cannot. Laws may govern outward actions, and conform them to moral and religious standards. Yet Qurʾānic wisdom goes to the heart and soul of Muslim piety, which can take on mystical dimensions not contemplated by observant praxis alone.

Legal revelations

As stated earlier, the Qurʾān is one of the two major sources of Islamic law. The other is the *ḥadīth* literature, which is a body of traditions that report the extra-canonical sayings and actions of Muḥammad. Together, the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* make up the *sunna*, the way of the prophet, which, in turn, becomes the *sharīʿa*, the code that Muslims should follow. If the Qurʾān is the revealed word of God, then the life and sayings of Muḥammad represent the will of God. Muḥammad is the perfect Muslim. Therefore, the pious Muslim will try to emulate the Prophet in just about every way, aside from his singularly prophetic mission.

Given the harsh realities of the day, the Qurʾān can at times be uncompromising. Some of its corporeal punishments are objectionable and unacceptable in the modern world today. Some Muslim reformers advocate dispensing with the letter of certain Islamic laws yet preserving the spirit (i.e., the principles and social goals that stand behind them).

Liturgical revelations

The Qurʾān has liturgical value because it is used in private and public worship. Among the many and varied devotional uses of the Qurʾān, the first *sūra* is used in daily obligatory prayer (*ṣalāt*). Qurʾānic recitation – that is, chanting the verses of the Qurʾān according to stylized canons of intonation and cadence – became an art-form in itself, just like Qurʾānic calligraphy. In a sense, Qurʾānic recitation re-enacts those original, revelatory moments of the spoken Qurʾān as they were first dictated by Muḥammad to his scribes.

The Qurʾān loses much of its force on the barren printed page. Emotions thrill to the spirited invocation of Qurʾānic passages, as a whole religious culture comes alive. One does not have to know Arabic to be struck by the emotional depth that is conveyed by Qurʾānic recitation. The hearts of the pious are swept with awe and fascination by the measured accents of the text, as it is experienced in the depth of the soul. Foremost among liturgical passages in the Qurʾān is *sūra* 55, where a recurring refrain runs throughout, as this excerpt illustrates:

He created man from sounding clay like unto pottery,
 And He created Jinns [spirits] from fire free of smoke:
Then which of the favors of your Lord will ye deny?
 (He is) Lord of the two Easts and Lord of the two Wests:
Then which of the favors of your Lord will ye deny?
 He has let free the two bodies of flowing water, meeting together:
 Between them is a Barrier which they do not transgress:
Then which of the favors of your Lord will ye deny?
 Out of them come Pearls and Coral:
Then which of the favors of your Lord will ye deny?
 (Q 55:14–23, Yusuf Ali's translation)

Polemical revelations

To promote Islam is also to defend it. Secular as well as religious charges were leveled at the prophet of Islam. Muḥammad was variously accused of being a crazed poet, soothsayer, or sorcerer, as well as a liar. In all of these cases, Qurʾānic polemics are to be seen as both actual and theoretical. They may be historical and localized, or doctrinal and generalized. Sometimes the Qurʾān directly cites the charges it refutes. The important thing to remember is that the Qurʾān, despite its exalted claims to revelation, is personalized

through the formative experience of Islam as a historical movement. Muḥammad and the early Muslims faced challenges, debates, and outright persecution. Under these circumstances, polemics served an immediate purpose, yet had a paradigmatic value as Islam spread to countries outside Arabia, where Islam was just as new then as before.

Another aspect of Qurʾānic polemics is apologetic in nature. Among the detractors of Islam were Jewish communities. This fact becomes problematic in the modern context and has fueled charges of a latent Islamic anti-Semitism. The many references to Judaism, however, are for instructive rather than polemical purposes, and a much greater focus is placed on the Prophethood of Moses, who is really a prototype of Muḥammad himself.

The Qurʾān has a certain degree of affection for Christians. During times of persecution in the early days of Islam, Christians tended to be the most sympathetic of onlookers. Muslims share a great deal in common with Christians. However, the Qurʾān brooks no tolerance for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Although the Qurʾān affirms the Virgin Birth, it does not accord Jesus the status of the Son of God (nor that of Jesus as God, for that matter). The Qurʾān also views original sin as absolute injustice and complete predestination. Pure Christianity is pure Islam, since there is only one true religion. What would Jesus do if he met Muḥammad? Muslims would say that Jesus would embrace the truth of Muḥammad's revelation, considering the fact that the Qurʾān states that Jesus prophesied the advent of Muḥammad.

Assessing the Qurʾān

Is the Qurʾān a revelation sent down by God, as Muslims claim? This is clearly a theological question. If the answer were yes, Christians and others might feel compelled to become Muslims. The simplest solution is to recognize Islam for what it is – a system of salvation at the center of which is the Qurʾān, which is functionally and effectively the word of God, entirely independent of what non-Muslims have to say about its truth-claims. The Qurʾān invites all humanity to respond to the call of God. It sees itself as the latest and fullest testimony of God and the most direct expression of the divine purpose for humanity. This is a monumental truth-claim, and must be taken very seriously when studying the text. Readers will wish to keep this salient fact in mind because it goes far to explain the power of the Qurʾān to command allegiance and serve as the effective constitution of entire Islamic societies.

Appreciating the Qurʾān

An understanding of the Qurʾān is analogous to music appreciation, although saying so is by no means meant to trivialize the purpose or process of gaining that understanding. Muslims have a coherent worldview, one that originates from the Qurʾān itself. To appreciate the Qurʾān is to develop a sensitivity to the operation of the divine in a culture removed for centuries from the Euro-American world but now increasingly an integral

part of it. One can only gain from such an understanding. Indeed, one can only be enriched by it, but only if one's prejudices are first abandoned. The Qur'ān is a world unto itself, a palatial architecture of meaning that is multidimensional and comprehends the totality of the human experience. On the moral and spiritual foundation of the Qur'ān, an entire history and civilization has been built.

To acknowledge the beauty and depth of the Qur'ān is not to convert to Islam, but to converse with it and with Muslims who are enlivened by it. Yes, the Qur'ān is a text of monumental historical importance. But it may have an even greater contemporary relevance, for in an increasing number of Western nations the population of Muslims is beginning to surpass the number of Jews. Thus the religion of Islam is rapidly entrenching itself as a French religion, as part of UK society, as a feature of the Canadian mosaic, and as an essential element of the spiritual landscape of the United States.

Applying the Qur'ān

Discovering the Qur'ān on a personal basis can be rewarding for its own sake, and can augment the quality of interpersonal and international relations. To know the Qur'ān is to better prepare oneself for inevitable encounters with Muslims both in America and abroad – not as the exotic “other” somewhere in the distant Orient, but as the religion and way of life of our fellow compatriots at home – friends, neighbors, and, through increasing religious intermarriage, our immediate and extended families. The events of September 11, 2001 have riveted world attention on Islam (albeit radical Islam). Sales of the Qur'ān and texts on Islam have skyrocketed. Indeed, the best response to (and defense against) radical Islamism is to be able to identify (and identify with) the humanitarian values that the Qur'ān enshrines, and calls upon humanity to promote. To invoke “chapter and verse” in support of Qur'ānic principle presupposes that one is conversant with the Qur'ān itself, if not with an entire thought-world and social universe comprised by the vast number of moderate Muslims in the world today. For the non-Muslim, reading the Qur'ān is: an act of engagement; a significant form of communication; a nod of intellectual and perhaps spiritual empathy; an opportunity to reflect, inwardly and outwardly, on the profound insights and truths whereby the Qur'ān rewards its sincere readers; for some, a religious moment without a religious commitment; a step in the direction of furthering interpersonal and international understanding and peace; and a gesture of appreciation for, if not a salute to, the deserving nobility of the “noble Qur'ān.”

Academically Assimilating the Qur'ān

The academic study of the Qur'ān is by no means a merely academic enterprise. For the Qur'ān is a text of world-historical proportions that institutions of higher learning can scarcely afford to ignore, because our domestic life, as well as international affairs, will be increasingly informed by it. Studying the Qur'ān will equip university students with

a competence they are sure to find useful in an increasingly multicultural world, one-fifth of which is already under Islam's spiritual, political, and cultural authority – with an even greater part of the world affected by it. A study of the Qur'ān, whether formally or informally, is an elective, if not a required course in cultivating spiritual literacy, of furthering academic well-roundedness in terms of a “liberal education,” and of expanding one's consciousness by vertical ascent of a new celestial and horizontal extension into a less familiar, and yet increasingly significant, social horizon. Conversance with the Qur'ān is further to endow “the humanities” with an added dimension of humanity.

The US courts have already weighed in on the University of North Carolina Qur'ān controversy. While reading the Qur'ān cannot be required, it is required reading for religious, political, cultural, and global literacy. In its own way, it is a democratic as well as academic enterprise. From neighbor to nation, appreciation of the Qur'ān is yet another way to equip our students to be better world citizens, at home and abroad.

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CHAPTER 3

Contextualizing

Abdullah Saeed

For many non-Muslims, and even Muslims who are not familiar with the Qurʾān, reading it in translation or in the original Arabic and understanding it is a very difficult task for a variety of reasons: lack of familiarity with the context of the Qurʾān; the time, place, people, and circumstances of the text, and the structure of the text provide barriers to immediate comprehension of its meaning. In the following discussion, I will rely primarily on traditional Muslim accounts of the nature of the Qurʾān, its structure, context, and understanding as well as the life of the prophet Muḥammad. The broad features of these accounts are still generally accepted in Muslim communities across the world who share a common view (even if frequently unenunciated) on the context within which the Qurʾān needs to be understood. Needless to say, these traditional accounts, as we find them in Muslim tradition, have been challenged by contemporary scholars and historians of Islam and the Qurʾān. However, given that such views will be covered elsewhere in this book, my primary interest is to provide an overview of what Muslims by and large accept as the “standard” accounts.

The Broad Historical Context of the Qurʾān

The Qurʾān is situated in the broader political, social, intellectual, and religious context of Arabia in general, and Mecca and Medina in particular, in the early seventh century CE. An understanding of the key aspects of this context will help the reader to make connections between the Qurʾānic text and the environment that led to the emergence of that text.

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Great empires

In the sixth century CE, much of the region we today call the Middle East was dominated by two great powers: the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanid Empire. Much of Arabia, however, except for the north and south, remained outside the direct influence of these two empires. Mecca, where Islam emerged, happened to be in the region where the empires did not hold sway. The two empires had fought endless wars (directly or by proxy) and were still doing so in the early seventh century.

The Byzantine Empire was on the whole Christian, the Sassanid Empire predominantly Zoroastrian. However, Sassanids had in their midst a number of other religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Christians, Jews, and pagan communities were scattered throughout Arabia. Mecca itself was largely pagan; its people worshiped a large number of idols housed in the sanctuary Ka'ba (called "House of God"). However, a few people in Mecca shunned the worship of idols and believed in a supreme God. The interaction, through trade, of Meccans with adherents of religions such as Judaism and Christianity appears to have been common, particularly with communities in neighboring regions such as Yathrib (later known as Medina), which had a number of Jewish tribes, and Abyssinia, which was largely Christian.

Mecca: The birthplace of Islam

In the early seventh century, Mecca was rather marginal. Apart from the importance some Arab pagans gave to the Ka'ba in Mecca and the caravan trade in which the Meccans were engaged, the town appears to have been insignificant. The people of Mecca were predominantly of one tribe, the Quraysh, which was made up of several clans. Some clans were rich and powerful and dominated the political scene, while others took on the responsibility of looking after the sanctuary and its visitors. The affairs of Mecca were managed by a collective of influential elders and the rich through an informal consultative process. There was no ruler or a formal state. In general, the clan (a subset of the tribe) provided safety and security for its members. This custom dictated that when a person from a tribe or a clan was threatened, it was the duty of the entire tribe or clan to defend that person, if necessary by going to war.

Life in Mecca and surrounding regions was harsh. The land was generally arid. No agriculture of note existed. While Mecca itself was a settled community, there were plenty of nomadic tribes around Mecca which were constantly on the move in search of water and vegetation for their animals, primarily camels and goats. Raids by one tribe on another were common. Settled communities had to enter into understandings and agreements with nomadic tribes to protect their communities and caravan trade from raids. Such unexpected raids and the insecurity associated therewith, coupled with the general hardships and uncertainties associated with life, gave the inhabitants a rather fatalistic view of the world.

Education largely comprised basic skills in survival, in the use of armaments such as swords and arrows, and in camels and horse riding. Only a few people were literate. In Muslim tradition, Muḥammad himself is considered to have been illiterate. For Muslims, the notion of an illiterate prophet provides strong support for the doctrine of the divine revelation of the Qurʾān. If the prophet was unable to read or write, the argument goes, he could not have composed a text such as the Qurʾān.

However, the Meccans had a particular love of language. Poetry and poets were revered. Beautifully expressed language was considered the pinnacle of intellectual activity. At certain times of the year, competitions were held in Mecca and surrounding regions for poets and orators. Only a few texts were written; these included the eloquently and beautifully expressed Arabic poetry. Several famous poems were reportedly written and displayed in important places like the Kaʿba.

It was in this environment that Muḥammad began to preach his message in Mecca in 610 CE. The Qurʾān is connected to that context, and much of the Qurʾānic text appears to reflect the realities of that context. Muslims in general often prefer to ignore the matter of context and argue instead that a close connection between the Qurʾānic text and its socio-historical context is not relevant to belief and interest in the Qurʾān. However, understanding the context helps us to understand why the Qurʾān dealt with particular issues and why it emphasized certain issues over others at particular times. The Qurʾān dealt with problems and issues that concerned the community.

Related to this broad context is also the life of the prophet. Thus, a historical overview of the prophet's life and of the early Muslim life would be helpful to the student of the Qurʾān in making sense of the text. Without this basic framework, it is often difficult to contextualize many parts of the Qurʾān.

Outline of Muḥammad's Life as a Framework for Understanding the Qurʾān

There are debates on whether there is a need to understand Muḥammad's life in order to understand the Qurʾān. For many Muslims, there is no need, as the Qurʾān is considered to be a divine communication and is not dependent on any person's life. Similarly for those Western scholars who believe that the biography of Muḥammad as we have in traditional Muslim accounts is not reliable, there is no need to use Muḥammad's life as a framework for understanding the Qurʾān. However, for the student of the Qurʾān, having some sense of the Muslim narrative of Muḥammad's life can be useful at least to make sense of significant parts of the Qurʾān.

The traditional Muslim biographical literature on Muḥammad suggests that Muḥammad's father died before he was born and his mother died before he was six. He was then looked after by his relatives: his grandfather until he was eight and thereafter his uncle, Abū Ṭālib. At the age of twenty-five, he married Khadija, a wealthy widow of Mecca, and they lived together until her death. All of his children (except one) were borne by Khadija. He continued working in his wife's business and lived an unremarkable life until the age of forty. Unlike his compatriots, Muḥammad liked to spend time

apart for reflection and meditation, often in a cave outside Mecca. Muslim tradition holds that it was during one of those retreats in a cave near Mecca that he experienced his first revelation or communication from God in 610 CE. According to tradition, while in the cave, Muḥammad heard a voice which commanded him to “read.” Three times the voice asked him to “read.” Each time, Muḥammad replied by saying, “I cannot read.” The third time, the voice commanded him to utter the following:

Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created, created Man from a blood-clot. Recite: for thy Lord is Most Generous, who taught by the pen, taught Man what he knew not.
(Q 96:1–5)

This was the first of the “revelations” which Muḥammad received. In the Qur’ān as we have it today, it is part of *sūra* (chapter) 96 (verses 1–5). Initially, Muḥammad was not sure what to make of this. In fear, he hurried to Mecca to his family. Khadija comforted him and later took him to one of her cousins, Waraqa, a Christian with knowledge of Christian scripture, who assured Muḥammad that what he had received was similar to that which prophets before him had received: revelation from God. Over the first three years, Muḥammad received more messages and began to teach them to his close friends and family. He then began to teach the message to the wider Meccan community. The initial message was that Meccans should accept that there was only one God, that this God was the creator and sustainer of everything, and that Muḥammad was sent by this God as a messenger to the Meccan people. These early messages also emphasized that Meccan people should be mindful of the needy and disadvantaged in their midst and that they should not forget the favors God had bestowed on them.

Naturally, many were skeptical and refused to accept the teachings of Muḥammad. However, a number of Muḥammad’s relatives and close friends and some marginalized people in Mecca followed him. Slowly, his teaching began to be accepted, but his opponents also began to work to marginalize him and put obstacles in his way by punishing those who followed him, particularly the slaves. Such persecution led Muḥammad to instruct his small group of followers to flee Mecca and seek protection with the Christian ruler of Abyssinia, who is identified in Muslim tradition as Negus. It was under the protection of Negus that the first Muslim migrant community was able to practice its religion away from Mecca.

After twelve years of preaching in Mecca, Muḥammad had been unable to convince the vast majority of Meccans to profess his new teachings. The tribes surrounding Mecca also rejected him. But he managed to convince a few people from Yathrib (later known as Medina), to the north of Mecca, to accept his teachings (Islam). These new converts promised Muḥammad that, if he decided to leave Mecca and settle in Medina, they would protect him and support his work. Fortunately for Muḥammad, a large number of Medinan people professed Islam readily and within a very short time. When his Meccan opponents began planning to kill Muḥammad, he and his remaining followers fled to Medina and settled there. Of the five tribes in Medina (two non-Jewish, three Jewish), only the non-Jewish tribes professed Islam. In Medina, Muḥammad established the first Muslim “state,” which comprised Muslims from both Mecca and Medina. He concluded agreements with the Jewish tribes for the common defense of Medina against external threats, particularly from the Meccans. Muslims and Jews lived together

peacefully at first, but tensions began to emerge which led to the ending of Jewish presence in Medina within a few years of Muḥammad's arrival. Much of the Qur'ānic critique of Jews belongs to this period and particularly in relation to Jews in Medina.

The followers of Muḥammad later came to be known as "Muslims." In Mecca, the opponents of the Muslims watched the new developments in Medina with increasing dismay. As Medina was not far from the caravan trade route to the north, Muslims could easily interfere with the trade activities of the Meccans. The first major conflict with the Meccans occurred in the second year after the migration (*hijra*) of the prophet and was closely associated with the attempt by Muslims to block the passage of a Meccan caravan returning from the north of Arabia to Mecca. In this battle (named the "Battle of Badr"), the Muslims, although numerically smaller, defeated the Meccans. It was the first major victory for Muslims against their Meccan opponents. Thereafter, several military confrontations between the two groups occurred until the final occupation of Mecca by Muslim forces in the eighth year after *hijra* (630 CE). By the time Muḥammad died in 11/632, Muslims had an established "state" and controlled much of Arabia, with their followers numbering, according to tradition, well over 100,000.

While the Qur'ān does not provide a systematic narrative of Muḥammad's life or the life of his community, there are occasional references to both. In *sūra* 105, reference is made to a group of people, called "Companions of the Elephant," who reportedly came to attack Mecca, probably in the same year as Muḥammad was born (570 or 571 CE). Another short *sūra* refers to the caravan trade of the Quraysh and their journeys in winter and summer to the north and south as part of that trade, and to how God provided them with food and security. No details are given about the events; the emphasis is on the basic message that God was the one who protected Mecca from the attackers and that God bestowed favors on the Quraysh by facilitating their trade. The *sūra* reads as follows:

For the covenants [of security and safeguard enjoyed] by the Quraysh. Their covenants [covering] journeys by winter and summer. Let them adore the Lord of this house, who provides them with food against hunger, and with security against fear [of danger].

This approach to historical events is quite consistent across the Qur'ān. It is not particularly interested in providing details of the time, place, characters, and circumstances of events; it emphasizes only the point of the message. Even the prophet's name Muḥammad is mentioned only four times in the Qur'ān. Often, he is referred to as the prophet (*nabī*) or messenger (*rasūl*). Rarely does the Qur'ān mention the names of Muḥammad's contemporaries. In one case, one of the opponents of Muḥammad, his uncle Abū Lahab, is mentioned, in another, his adopted son Zayd.

The Qur'ān as "Revelation" in Arabic

The Qur'ān is the most sacred religious text for Muslims. It is the foundation of Islam and remains the primary source of guidance in all aspects of life: spiritual, legal, moral, political, economic, and social. It is considered to be the speech of God communicated to Muḥammad (i.e., "revelation") between 610 and 632 CE in Arabia. Many Muslim

theologians believed that the most common form of the revelation of the Qurʾān to the prophet was from God via the angel Gabriel. From their point of view, the angel brought the word of God to the prophet verbatim, in Arabic, the language that the prophet spoke (Q 26:195). The Qurʾān stresses that the prophet was required only to receive the sacred text and that he had no authority to change it (Q 10:15). The Qurʾān strongly denies that it is the speech or the ideas of the prophet or, indeed, of any other human being. It challenges those who consider it the speech of Muḥammad to produce a book similar to it or even one *sūra* like it (Q 2:23). The Qurʾān affirms that the revelation came directly from God and in Arabic so that it would be without human-induced errors or inaccuracies: “Do they not consider the Qurʾān [with care]? Had it been from any source other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy” (Q 4:82).

For most Muslims, the angel was entrusted with a direct message *in Arabic*, not simply with meanings and ideas. The revelation was intended to be comprehensible to ordinary people. The Qurʾān says: “Verily this is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds: with it came down the spirit of faith and truth to your heart and mind, that you may admonish in the perspicuous Arabic tongue” (Q 26:192–5). Given that Muḥammad’s own language was Arabic and the community to whom he began preaching his message was Arab, the religious text that he used to support his preaching was also in Arabic. The Qurʾān says that all prophets received their “revelations” or “scriptures” in their own language to facilitate communication with their communities. Although most Muslims today do not speak Arabic, they recite the Qurʾān in Arabic. One of the first things that Muslims are taught from early childhood is how to recite the Qurʾān in Arabic.

For non-Muslims, perhaps, who do not relate to it in terms of faith, the Qurʾān is just like any other text. To Muslims, however, the Qurʾān is not just a text to be understood and read; it is also something to be listened to. The reciter of the Qurʾān is an important figure in the Muslim community and his or her presence is sought eagerly for important celebrations or events. Qurʾānic recitation is an art that is cultivated in Muslim seminaries and mosques. The voice of the reciter and the beauty of the recitations are equally appreciated by Muslims around the world (Sells 1999: 1–3). For devout Muslims, whether they understand the meaning of the recitation or not, there is something very moving about it. A person is attracted to it by simply listening to the beautiful voice of the reciter. Perhaps this can be compared to the culture of singing in Christianity.

For Muslims, the voice captivates individuals and groups alike. In fact, recitation of the Qurʾān on a daily basis is a common practice among devout Muslims. If they do not recite it themselves, they may make an effort to listen to it. When Muslims listen to Qurʾānic recitation they believe that they are hearing the word of God, through the voice of the reciter. The fact that many Muslims do not understand the meaning is of little importance or relevance to them. The main issue for them is that they are able to recite and listen to the word of God.

Muslims believe that this extraordinary power of the word of God through the voice of the reciter was equally important in the early Islamic times during Muḥammad’s time. In fact, the tradition holds that one of the ways the prophet reportedly attracted a large number of Meccans to his mission was through the beautiful and powerful words of God that he recited to Meccan audiences. Given that the Meccans had, according to the tradition, an

extraordinary sensitivity to beautiful words and language, they were captivated by the beauty of the Qurʾān. Even the most ardent opponents of the prophet were said to have been captivated by its majestic power. One such enemy was ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who converted to Islam and came to be one of the most influential Muslims after Muḥammad.

The Qurʾān as Scripture

There are several verses which appear to indicate that, during the time of Muḥammad, the Qurʾān came to be conceived of as scripture, not just spoken word. It thus became a book, a scripture (*kitāb*) much like the earlier scriptures given to the prophets before Muḥammad (Q 98:1–3): “God has sent down to you the book and wisdom and taught you what you knew not before” (Q 4:113; also see 2:231; 4:105). Certainly, the Qurʾān considered itself as scripture or book: “And recite what has been revealed to thee of the book of thy Lord: none can change His words” (Q 18:27). This is reiterated in the verse: “We have revealed for you a book in which is a message for you” (Q 21:10). In fact, the Qurʾān uses *kitāb* (“scripture”) to refer to itself more than seventy times in various contexts, indicating that the concept of the Qurʾān as a book or scripture was well established before Muḥammad’s death in 11/632 (Q 2:176; 3:7; 4:105; 6:154–7; 16:64; 29:47). However, it was not put together or compiled into one volume at that stage.

At first, the Qurʾān remained largely in the memories of Muḥammad and his immediate followers (known as the “Companions”); but, shortly after the death of Muḥammad in 632, a number of the followers began to think about “collecting” all the parts of the Qurʾān into one volume to safeguard it against corruption and distortion. For Muslims, since the collection was completed very early on and in the presence of those who had witnessed the revelation and retained what had been revealed in their memory and in documents, there was the opportunity to prepare a historically reliable and accurate version. Those who were entrusted with the task of putting together the Qurʾān, according to Muslim tradition, were a committee of senior companions who were among those most closely associated with the Qurʾān during the time of Muḥammad.

One may wonder whether the collected material which now exists in the Qurʾānic text represents the totality of what was revealed to the prophet. Whatever the actual case, for a Muslim, the Qurʾān, as collected during the reign of ʿUthmān, represents the historical, authentic codification of the revelation. Any texts which may have been excluded from the final codified text of the Qurʾān were not considered by those who compiled it to be essential parts of the text. The standard Sunnī Muslim view is that such exclusions, if any, were based on Muḥammad’s instructions. Early Shīʿī scholars expressed the view that certain texts that made references to the family of the prophet were excluded by the committee that compiled the Qurʾān. Today, however, such views among the Shīʿites are not common and both the Sunnīs and Shīʿites accept the Qurʾānic text as it is. There are no different versions of the Qurʾān today among Muslims. From a Muslim point of view, the authenticity and reliability of the codified text that became the basis of Islam is not to be seriously questioned, notwithstanding the arguments advanced by scholars such as Wansbrough (1977).

Central Themes of the Qurʾān

The Qurʾān deals with many themes but one theme that stands out is that of God and the relationship of God to human beings. All other issues revolve around this central theme. From the beginning, the Qurʾān talked about God and God's relationship to the creation of human beings and the universe in general. The Qurʾān relied on the understanding that pre-Islamic Arabs, including Meccans, had of God. References to God were not entirely foreign to those people. They knew of "God"; they had a sanctuary that was referred to as the "House of God" and they interacted with Christians and Jews, who talked about "God."

One God

The Qurʾān affirmed the existence of one God. It rejected the belief that there were many gods in addition to a higher god, as the Meccans believed. For the Meccan people, the lesser gods functioned as intermediaries between the higher god and themselves. In the Qurʾān, the one God is often referred to as Allāh or is given other attributes such as the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Creator, the Sustainer, the Everlasting, the Omnipotent, the Just, the Revengeful, and the Wise. Muslim tradition records ninety-nine names or attributes of God, and these are widely used in the Qurʾān. Despite these attributes, the Qurʾān emphatically denies that there is any similarity or any likeness of God to anything which we can imagine or think of, while still using attributes that are understandable in the human context. Muslim theologians argued endlessly about this; one helpful view is that these attributes function like ideals or goals for human beings to aim at. For example, if God is forgiving, human beings should strive to adopt this value of forgiving.

The Qurʾān states that there is nothing that escapes God, who created everything and who sustains that creation. It is in God's power to destroy everything and bring it back to life. Another associated theme is that God will bring all human beings back to life after they die and will judge them on the day of judgment. These ideas were particularly difficult for the Meccans, who often asked Muḥammad rather despairingly how human beings could be brought back to life. With reference to this, the Qurʾān says: "They [Meccans] say: 'When we are bones and mortal remains, will we be raised up in some flesh creation?'" (Q 17:49, 98).

Spiritual beings

The Qurʾān acknowledges that there are other beings beside God that might be considered spiritual, beings that we do not have any understanding or experience of, such as angels. Angels are referred to frequently in the Qurʾān, and some of them are said to have specific functions, such as bringing revelation to prophets or forewarning of death.

In fact, one of the six “pillars” of faith in Islam is a belief in angels. In one of the verses, the Qurʾān makes this connection between belief in God and belief in angels: “The messenger [Muḥammad] believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and so do believers [Muslims]; everyone believes in God and His angels, His scriptures and His messengers [prophets]” (Q 2:285).

Below the angels, there are other beings referred to as *jinn*. Unlike angels, these are beings that may or may not be obedient to God. There are many references to *jinn*, and sometimes *jinn* and human beings are referred to in the same verse. For example, Q 51:56 says, “I have only created *jinn* and human beings so they may worship Me.” From a Qurʾānic point of view, *jinn* are like human beings in terms of obedience or disobedience to God but their nature is different.

Satan as the symbol of evil

The symbol of disobedience to God is Satan (usually identified as Iblīs), a figure seen by the Qurʾān as a *jinn* in origin but which somehow came to be associated with angels (Q 18:50). In the Qurʾānic story of creation, at a certain point, God wanted to create a human being, called Adam. God informed the angels of this. Some angels protested and said that this being would create havoc on earth. God rejected their arguments and created the being, known as Adam. God then asked all the angels to bow down to Adam. All the angels obeyed God, with the exception of Iblīs (Satan), who objected to God’s command and argued that he, Iblīs, was superior to Adam (Q 2:30–8). Iblīs thus rebelled against God. God, however, gave him the opportunity to do whatever he wanted until the end of time. As a result, according to Muslim belief, Iblīs is engaged in leading human beings astray and away from God, a task he promised God that he would do. From the Qurʾānic point of view, the force of good is God and the force of evil is Satan but created by God, and these two forces exist side by side. The Qurʾān presents Satan as a perpetual force of evil until the end of the world as we know it, but Satan is also subject to God’s power.

Creation of human beings and God’s guidance through prophets

According to the Qurʾān, once God had created the first human being, Adam, He provided that human with a partner (known in the Islamic tradition as Hawwa’ (Eve)). The Qurʾān accepts that Adam and his partner committed the sin of disobeying God by eating from a certain tree that was prohibited for them. For this, they were moved out of their abode, which the Qurʾān calls a *janna* (“garden”), into the mundane world. The Qurʾān says that all people are descendants of Adam and Eve and thus form a single family. It also states that all people on earth receive God’s instructions or guidelines on how to live correctly in the world. These messages come through prophets and messengers; some messengers receive revelation in the form of scriptures, others do not receive a formal revelation but are somehow “inspired.” According to tradition, there are thousands of prophets and messengers. However, only twenty-five are

mentioned by name in the Qurʾān. They include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Zachariah, David, Solomon, Jesus, and Muḥammad. The Qurʾānic view is that every community, without exception, had received “warners” (prophets and teachers) from God. The basic message they taught was that God is the creator and sustainer of the universe and that human beings should recognize this and lead an ethical and moral life. The Qurʾān goes into some detail regarding Adam and the first human family, Noah and the great flood, Moses, Pharaoh and the children of Israel, Joseph and his time in Egypt, Jesus and his teachings and miracles, Mary and the birth of Jesus. The purpose of these accounts is not to provide a historical account of what happened with dates, place names, and people’s names. Instead, these stories are “addressed to the human soul. [They depict] in vivid terms the ups and downs, the trials and vicissitudes of the human soul in terms of accounts of bygone people which were not only true about such and such a people and time but concern the soul here and now” (Nasr 1971: 51).

Life after death

The Qurʾān talks about the hereafter and about issues related to life after death in great detail. From the Qurʾānic point of view, while this world is important, what comes after is more important because it is everlasting; it is then that the final fate of human beings will be decided. The world as we know it will come to an end. All human beings will be raised one day and be accountable for all their actions. On that day, God will judge between all people; those who followed God’s path will enter the “garden” or “paradise” (*janna*) and those who followed Satan’s path will enter “hell” (*jahannam*). Descriptions of both paradise and hell are covered in many *sūras*, particularly the Meccan.

Moral and legal matters

Another important theme of the Qurʾān is law and related matters such as how the affairs of the Muslim community should be conducted. This includes how to worship God through prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage; marriage and divorce; the restriction of polygyny; the regulation of slavery; spending money to help the poor and needy; relations between the sexes; children and custody; punishment for crimes such as theft, murder, adultery, and slander; prohibition of gambling; war and peace; commercial transactions; and inheritance. It also covers moral injunctions such as moderation in behavior, justice, fairness, forgiveness, honesty, kindness to one’s parents and relatives, generosity, and the keeping of promises. It warns against superstition, telling lies, malicious gossip, and spying. While references are made to legal and ethical-moral issues frequently, the Qurʾān, according to Fazlur Rahman (1966: 37), “is primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations, and is not a legal document. But it does embody some important legal enunciations issued during the community-state building

process at Medina.” The number of legal verses in the Qur’ān ranges from 100 to 500, depending on the definition of the term “legal,” which is a relatively small portion of the entire text of the Qur’ān with its approximately 6,300 verses.

Understanding the *Sūra*

Books as we know them today often deal with one main topic only but are divided into sub-topics, which makes it relatively easy to follow the structure and argument of the book. However, the Qur’ān is different. For the beginning student of the Qur’ān, the topics it deals with can appear haphazardly ordered. Long *sūras* usually appear to jump from one topic to another, and it can be difficult to see the links between the topics. For example, the second *sūra* of the Qur’ān begins by referring to the Qur’ān as a book about which there is no doubt and then listing the characteristics of the believers (Muslims). It then moves to an exposition of what it calls *munāfiqūn* (“religious hypocrites”) in Medina and their attitudes towards Muslims. A. Yusuf Ali, whose translation of the meanings of the Qur’ān is used widely today, provides a summary of key themes covered in *sūra* 2:

Verses

1–29	Description of the three kinds of people (believers, religious hypocrites, and unbelievers)
30–39	Story of creation of the first human being and his partner, the destiny intended for him, his fall and the hope held out to him
40–86	Story of the Israelites and the privileges they received and how they responded to God’s call
87–121	Moses, Jesus, and their struggles with their people; the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) and their rejection of Muḥammad
122–141	Abraham, the father of Ishmael and Isaac, and the building of the Ka’ba (the sanctuary in Mecca) and the Abrahamic tradition
142–167	The Ka’ba as the center of universal worship and the symbol of Islamic unity
168–242	The Muslim <i>umma</i> (“community”) and ordinances for the social life of the community related to food and drink, bequests, fasting, war and peace, gambling, treatment of the disadvantaged; treatment of women
243–253	Story of Goliath and David and of Jesus
254–283	That true virtue lies in practical deeds of kindness and good faith
255	God and throne
284–286	Exhortation to faith, obedience, personal responsibility, and prayer.

While *sūra* 2 is the longest and has many themes within it, the short *sūras* usually deal with one matter only. An example of a short *sūra* is Q 107:

Have you seen someone who rejects religion? That is the person who pushes the orphan aside and does not promote feeding the needy. It will be too bad for the prayerful who are

absent-minded as they pray, who aim to be noticed, while they hold back contributions.
(Q 107:1–7)

Chronology of the verses in the sūra

The content of the *sūra* (particularly the long ones) is not usually chronologically ordered. The verses of a *sūra* may come from very different times of the prophetic mission, between 610 and 632 CE. While short *sūras* are more likely to have been communicated as a unit at the same time, the verses of the long and medium-length *sūras* may have come at different times. More problematic for the reader is that it is often difficult to identify which parts of the *sūra* were revealed when. When Muslims read a *sūra* and attempt to understand what it says, they often do not think about when a particular text was revealed and the reason for its revelation. Questions like these are of enormous importance for Muslim jurists but seem less so for ordinary Muslims. When they recite a particular *sūra*, they would be more concerned about its broader message than any emphasis on when that message came, about whom or what. For the average Muslim, the Qurʾān is, first and foremost, a sacred religious text, and the circumstances of its revelation are irrelevant. However, earlier Muslim scholars studied the Qurʾān and commented upon it, interpreted it, and made significant attempts at understanding when a particular *sūra* or significant parts thereof were revealed. Thus the reader will find at the beginning of each *sūra* a reference as to where the *sūra*, or at least the larger part of the *sūra*, was revealed: Mecca or Medina. Understanding this helps situate the *sūra* and its content in the timeframe of Muḥammad’s mission.

Early and later texts

The *sūras* at the beginning of the Qurʾān as it exists now are not necessarily from early in the prophet’s mission. The very early Qurʾānic revelations are actually at the end of the Qurʾānic text as we have it today. Most of the *sūras* from the Meccan period deal with matters such as God as creator and sustainer, how human beings should be grateful to God, and how they should relate to God. The early *sūras* also address social justice issues, including the treatment of the poor and needy. They state that God has given many favors to the people of Mecca and the surrounding regions. The following is an example of one of the earliest *sūras* (in Mecca), which reminds Muḥammad of God’s favor towards him and the exhortation to help those in need:

By the morning bright, and at night all is still. Your Lord has not forsaken you [Muḥammad], nor is He annoyed. The hereafter will be even better for you than the first [life] was. Your Lord will soon give you something which will leave you satisfied. Did He not find you an orphan and sheltered [you]? He found you lost and guided [you]. He found you destitute

and made you rich. Thus the orphan must not be exploited; and the beggar should not be brushed aside. Still tell about your Lord's favor. (Q 93:1–11)

There are many references to past prophets and how their communities responded to the missions of those prophets, often as a form of consolation to Muḥammad that what he was facing in Mecca was not unique. From a Qur'ānic point of view, this is, in fact, the history of the confrontation between good and evil, between God's guidance and Satan's temptation.

In the Medinan texts of the Qur'ān, while these themes continue to an extent, much more emphasis is given to providing guidance to the prophet on managing a community in its legal, economic, and political spheres. Matters such as war and peace, and punishment for offenses such as murder, theft, and adultery, come from the Medinan period. This is simply because, in Mecca, Muḥammad and his small number of followers had little influence politically and there was no possibility of establishing a Muslim "state" there; in Medina, however, the prophet and his followers from both Mecca and Medina formed the first Muslim "state," in which Muḥammad functioned as both judge and political and military leader. There was also a small band of opponents called hypocrites, from among Muslims and opposition from the Jewish community of Medina. Tensions between these groups and critiques of their beliefs and attitudes are prominently covered in the Medinan parts of the Qur'ān.

Shifts in voice

In reading the *sūras*, the beginner reader might find quite often the sudden shift in voice quite bewildering (Sells 1999: 20–1). Although throughout the Qur'ān the speaker is considered to be God, it is not clear when or for what purpose the speaker changes from the first person to the third person, and even to the second person. God is often referred to in the third person; for example: "Anyone who obeys God and His messenger will be admitted to gardens through which rivers flow, to live there for ever" (Q 4:13). At times, He is referred to in the first person singular: "I have only created *jinn* and human beings so they may worship Me" (Q 51:56), while at other times it is first person plural: "We shall test you with a bit of fear and hunger" (Q 2:155). At other times, God is referred to in the second person: "We worship Thee." Confusion arises as a result of the use of the first person plural (We) to refer to God. "We" does not refer to a multiplicity of gods; rather, it is similar to the royal "we" used in English.

The Qur'ān takes it for granted that it is God who is speaking throughout and it rarely uses "God says." Sometimes the text addresses the prophet directly: "O prophet, heed God and do not obey disbelievers and hypocrites" (Q 33:1). At other times it addresses people in general: "O people"; the "believers" (Muslims) or the "unbelievers"; or the "People of the Book." Whatever the voice, it is always assumed that the message is from God through the medium of Muḥammad.

Understanding Parts of the Qurʾān with the Help of Other Parts

For Muslims, the Qurʾān is a coherent whole with a unified purpose. This means that often difficult sections or verses of the Qurʾān can be clarified in another part of the text. An ambiguous verse may have its explanation in another verse or verses. An issue raised by one verse may be elaborated on by another verse (Ibn Taymiyya 1392: 93). An example of an explanation of one verse by another is as follows. Q 2:37 states: “Thereupon Adam received words [of guidance] from his Sustainer, and He accepted his repentance: for verily, He alone is the Acceptor of repentance, the Dispenser of grace.” This verse indicates that Adam received certain “words” (*kalimāt*) from God. However, it does not elaborate on what these words were. This elaboration is provided by Q 7:23, which states: “The two [Adam and Eve] said: ‘Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls. If You do not forgive us, and do not bestow upon us Your mercy, we shall certainly be lost.’”

Another form of explanation of one set of verses by others is related to cases where the Qurʾān makes reference to a particular issue, event, or person in more than one place or *sūra*. While for the novice this may seem to be repetition, the emphasis in each place is usually on a different aspect of the issue. To get a clearer picture of the issue at hand, it is important to bring together all the verses that deal with that issue. For instance, the Qurʾān, on several occasions, refers to the “people of Thamūd,” a northwestern Arabian people. Their story is scattered throughout the Qurʾān: Q 7:73–9; 11:61–8; 26:141–59; 27:45–53; 51:43–5; 53:50–1; 54:23–31; 69:4–5; and 91:11–15. Without bringing together all these verses from different *sūras* it will be difficult to get a clear picture of the scope of the Qurʾān’s treatment of this issue. Even then, there may be significant gaps. Exegetes of the Qurʾān usually go to external sources to fill in these gaps. They often consult the Bible, for instance, on matters related to Moses or Jesus.

Muslim exegetical tradition mentions instances in which Muḥammad explained certain parts of the Qurʾān to his followers. According to the Qurʾān, one of the functions of the prophet was to explain the text to the people: “And upon you have We bestowed from on high this reminder [Qurʾān] so that you explain to the people what has been revealed to them” (Q 16:44). An example of Muḥammad’s reported explanation is as follows. It is reported that Muḥammad’s companions could not grasp what the Qurʾān meant by “wrongdoing” (*ẓulm*) in the following verse: “Those who have attained to faith and who have not obscured their faith by wrongdoing (*ẓulm*) – it is they who shall be secure since it is they who have found the right path” (Q 6:82). The companions said to Muḥammad, “O messenger of God, who from among us has not committed [any] wrong?” The companions here appear to have understood *ẓulm* in its literal sense of wrongdoing. The prophet reportedly explained this by saying that “wrongdoing” here refers to “ascribing divine powers to beings other than God” as in Q 31:30 (Ibn Ḥajar 1990–3: I, 123).

Although questions related to the meaning of verses would have been directed to Muḥammad, there is no indication that he held special sessions to expound the meaning of the Qurʾān. The practice was *ad hoc* and depended entirely on circumstances. The most common practice seems to have been that Muḥammad simply recited to those present at the time what he received as revelation and assumed that they understood the text. Of course, not all verses would have been equally understood by everyone, especially with regard to some metaphorical expressions. Most of the prophet's interpretation to his followers was practical (indirect), rather than expository (direct). An indirect interpretation would be of the performance of *ṣalāt*, which the Qurʾān commands Muslims to perform but does not give any details as to how this is to be accomplished. Muḥammad taught Muslims how to perform *ṣalāt* in practice. In direct interpretation, what is noticeable is that his interpretation is generally in the form of "it means [such and such]," and the general meaning of the verse or phrase is then given. There is no philological or semantic analysis, which indicates that the prophet was more interested in conveying the practical implications of the Qurʾān as it applied to a particular circumstance.

Based on the two sources, the Qurʾān and Muḥammad's guidance, Muslim scholars have developed a great number of Qurʾānic exegetical works over the past 1,400 years. Some of these rely very heavily on the Qurʾān and the reported explanations of Muḥammad; others draw on a range of additional sources to expound the meanings of the Qurʾān. Some have produced mystical, linguistic, literary, philosophical, theological, or legal exegetical works. In the modern period, a rich array of exegetical works has been produced.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter aimed to provide an overview of some of the key ideas that may help in approaching the Qurʾān and making some sense of it. Given that many students who are attempting to read the Qurʾān today may or may not be Muslim, I have tried to be as neutral as possible in dealing with this topic while attempting to be as close as possible to mainstream traditional Muslim positions. Readers may find elsewhere more detailed expositions and critiques of Muslim positions on a range of issues covered in this chapter. For students who do not have advanced Arabic skills, there are many translations of the Qurʾān or, as Muslims would like to refer to them, "translations of the meanings of the Qurʾān." Even for a reader with advanced Arabic skills, the language of the Qurʾān can be quite daunting, and an accessible translation with some commentary in English can be helpful. Some translations are accompanied by commentary in the form of extensive footnotes (as is the case with Muḥammad Asad's (1980) *The Message of the Qurʾān* or A. Yusuf Ali's (1934) *The Holy Qurʾān* or Abu al-Aʿla Mawdudi's (1988) *Towards Understanding the Qurʾān*, a popular modern commentary originally written in Urdu but translated into English). The quality and standard of the available English translations vary enormously. The search for the ideal translation goes on because most existing

translations have their share of problems, ranging from accuracy in rendering the meanings of the Arabic text to distortions that may occur as a result of the authors' theological, sectarian, or religious disposition. For this reason, it is important for the beginning reader to have access to a good annotated bibliography of the translations of the Qur'ān into English before deciding on which translation and commentary to use.

Further reading

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PART II

Text

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CHAPTER 4

Linguistic Structure

Salwa El-Awa

Many non-Arabic-speaking readers of the Qurʾān find that they cannot understand the interrelations between the different parts of its long *sūras*, and, sometimes, of its shorter *sūras* as well. This does not come as a surprise to the Arabic-speaking reader of the same text. Although the latter is more familiar with the style of the Qurʾān, she does not seem able to explain its textual relations much more readily. In this chapter, I explain why these relations seem problematic to readers of the Qurʾān and propose an alternative approach to understanding them. In the introduction, I shed light on some of the general problems in understanding the structure of the Qurʾānic text and the main viewpoints from which they can be addressed. In the second section I follow the development of these approaches throughout the history of Qurʾānic studies. I then discuss, from a text-analytical point of view, why textual relations are a problem in the Qurʾānic text. Finally, I propose a new framework for understanding these relations rooted in an appreciation of the role of context in explaining the structure and the meaning of the text.

The Problem

The following example demonstrates the problem; it is composed of the three middle sections of a relatively short Qurʾānic *sūra* (Q 75). The numbers preceding each line are the verse numbers. A reading of this text shows that, contrary to what would normally

be expected from three consecutive parts of one text, these sections do not form a unit, nor do they display any obvious connectivity/coherence.

- 14 But man is a witness against himself.
15 Even though he might tender his excuses.
- ***
- 16 Move not your tongue to hasten with it.
17 Verily, upon Us is its gathering and its recitation.
18 Thus, when We recite it follow its recitation.
19 And then, verily, it is upon Us to clarify it.
- ***
- 20 No indeed. But you love the world that hastens away,
21 and you forsake the hereafter.
22 Faces will on that day be radiant,
23 gazing to their Lord.
24 And faces will on that day be scowling,
25 knowing that a backbreaking is about to befall them.

The following are only some of the questions that would occur to the non-Arabic-speaking reader of this text:

- 1 What is the relation between the first and the second sections? The second section seems to be completely unconnected; it has no semantic or grammatical connection with the surrounding sections.
- 2 Is it possible, given the history of the text, that this section has been misplaced?
- 3 Who is the addressee of the second section? Is it the same as the addressee of the third section? The third section begins with what seems to be an answer to a question. What is that question and where is it?

These questions are divided into three groups. This division corresponds to three very common ways in which people tend to think of text structure. The questions in the first group tackle the problem from a thematic viewpoint. They try to find a common theme that links the three sections together and then come up with one topic that could include the three sections together as parts of one large unit of meaning, or, perhaps, three closely related topics, through whose relation one can justify the arrangement of the three sections one after the other. In the case of this particular text, many readers who have attempted to explain it from thematic viewpoints have failed. Although one may find a possible relation between the first and third sections, there seems to be no obvious reason why the second section should be where it is. Why should a section about man making excuses for his deeds be followed immediately by a section on the revelation of the Qur'ān and the manner of its recitation, followed by a third on how people will look on judgment day?

Around the middle of the last century, this approach to the study of the structure of the Qur'ān became very popular in the Muslim world thanks to the works of two

prominent exegetes who published two full commentaries trying to discover a thematic unity in each and every *sūra* of the Qur'ān, Sayyed Quṭb (d. 1966) and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997). The outcome of their works will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. Meanwhile, we continue to consider other angles from which this problem might be tackled.

The second group of questions suggests that it is not right to place the second section where it is. Fundamentally, this suggestion has to do with our existing information about the text's history. If people did not know, for example, about the difficulties the Arabs had in finding writing materials, or if they knew more facts about text memorization in early oral cultures, perhaps this kind of question would not be asked in exactly the way it is. Our knowledge or lack of knowledge of the text's history determines to a large extent what questions we feel we can ask about its composition and structure. The fact that the text has been revealed (according to Muslims)/composed (according to non-Muslims) over a period of some twenty-three years, and that the final written codex was not completed and made official for more than a decade after the death of Muḥammad, has influenced the way researchers have approached the problems they encounter when trying to understand the structure of the text. This association has led a number of scholars to attempt a rearrangement of the Qur'ān according to the historical order of the revelations (i.e., trying to produce a sequence by which verses revealed earlier were placed first and the later ones placed after them and so on). In spite of the interesting and useful insights into the stylistic differences between the earlier and the later *sūras* which Nöldeke's work (1909–38) contains, and the more thematically coherent text and the lengthy notes on style and grammatical problems in Bell's critical rearrangement of the Qur'ān (1937–9), such attempts have been largely unsuccessful. The fact of the matter is, they do not solve the central problem in response to which they were written: they do not make reading the Qur'ān and understanding its structure any easier.

Another problem with this approach, which would perhaps be more important to a structuralist text critic, is that this type of question undermines the text's authority as an independent piece of writing that should be understood and studied on its own merits and sets a limit on the interpreter's ability to explain the text in ways beyond the obvious. It implies a suggestion that the text as it stands now should be dismissed and replaced by another with a different arrangement. Modern text critics cannot welcome such a suggestion. In this day and age, when a postmodern poem does not make much sense in terms of the relations between its lines, or when a few pages of a novel contain a description of a fictional character who is to appear only in the last chapter, critics do not wonder whether a huge mistake has taken place during the editing process. Instead, they engage in an active process of interpretation, aiming to come as close as possible to the intended meaning and purpose of the unusual style.

For all the reasons discussed above, and with the growing interest in structuralism as a literary approach that could benefit the study of the Qur'ān as a text, this approach did not develop much after the second third of the last century. Instead, scholars redirected their efforts towards the study of the Qur'ān as a literary text using tools derived from both linguistics and literary criticism.

I now turn to the third group of questions, which focuses mainly on the linguistic structure of the text. It tries to find in the linguistic components of the three sections some indicators as to what might be the relations between the different parts of the text. Various grammatical and non-grammatical elements influence our understanding of text structure. In the case of this text, pronouns were questioned. Pronouns are words that writers use to refer to other entities known to the recipient of the text (either by having been mentioned in previous parts of the text or from the extra-linguistic context). When recipients find it difficult to work out what the references of the pronouns are, they feel that the text is ambiguous or incoherent. Take, for example, the question about the addressees of sections two and three above. There are no explicit referents to the addressee pronouns in either section. However, because one expects that a pronoun must have a referent, the reader tries to search for any clues as to who might be the addressees of the two sections, and whether they could be the same person. The addressee of section two is instructed to read the Qurʾān slowly, specifically, not to “hasten” in its recitation. The addressee of section three, on the other hand, is rebuked for loving the world which “hastens” away. Could this be an indicator that the two pronouns refer to the same person? Might it be a person whose haste in recitation is just a symptom of his love of this world and impatience which leads him to forsake the hereafter?

In this particular case, this question can be partly answered by reference to the Arabic origin of the text where we find that the addressee of section two is in the singular and of section three in the plural (which some translations have indicated by use of the old English versions of the pronoun which retain the distinction between singular and plural). However, establishing that the addressees of the two sections are different does not solve the problem; it only sends us back to square one where we did not know who is addressed by each section because the pronoun reference is not clear, and where there was no indication of what links the two sections together.¹

One element, however, can help us to explore more possible answers to all the above questions. In reading the discussions above, it will have been noticed that there were several items of information whose absence from my discussions has possibly added to the complexity of the matter, and if they were to be borne in mind perhaps the case would not have been as problematic as it now appears to be. In general, could it be possible that reading these textual relations would have been easier if the whole of the *sūra* were available to us and used to support the various elements in the discussion? For example, verse 14 begins with a “but” indicating contradiction with a previous statement to which we have no access in this reading. Similarly, it is possible that there is a story behind those instructions on the manner of recitation which, if we knew it, might shed some light on the reason why verses 16–19 are placed where they are.

Now that I have given an overview of the type of problems that the study of textual relations involves, and before I begin analyzing some examples of the text to show how these problems occur, I shall briefly review the ways in which scholars have approached Qurʾānic textual relations from the early days of Qurʾānic studies up to the present day.

Previous Works

Scholarly interest in understanding the structure of the Qurʾān goes back to the early stages of Qurʾānic studies and the so-called “golden age of Islamic scholarship.” The earliest work known to us which emphasizes the textual relations element of the meaning of the Qurʾān is the substantial commentary *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). His work is representative of the way in which scholars thought of textual relations at the time, which is best described as “linear.” At every point where a change of subject matter takes place, al-Rāzī tries to explain the relations between the subject matter of the preceding and the following section, at times on a broad thematic basis and, at others, by trying to find a hidden clue, thematic or linguistic, to a link between the sections. He applies this method throughout the entire Qurʾān. At the end of each *sūra*, he searches for an explanation of the relation between the last verse of the *sūra* and the first of the following one and so on, through to the last verse of the last *sūra*. This forms a long line of relations linking Qurʾānic verses like a chain in which some links are bigger than others, according to the different lengths of the sections. Since the section division itself was arbitrary, as the borderlines between them are often not clear-cut, different scholars would apply different divisions to the *sūras* and hence the same verse does not belong to the same section in every commentary.

Although the explanations in these commentaries are diverse and interesting, they remain intuitive and individual. Each commentator had his own different interpretations of the relations between sections, based on his personal understanding of *sūras* and influenced by his political or religious affinity, which only proved that these relations were indeed ambiguous and in need of a more rigorous approach to unravel them. The efforts of the early commentators have therefore remained unhelpful for the modern-day reader, especially in terms of their methodology, and have left modern scholars with more or less the same problem as that with which their predecessors had to deal.

In the 1950s two scholars, one in the Indian subcontinent and one in the Middle East, wrote two very similar commentaries on the Qurʾān with a focus on interrelations and structures of *sūras*. Preoccupied with the then popular idea in literary theory that the text has to possess “organic unity” in order for it to possess textuality and be of a literary quality, the two scholars have come up with the idea of a core theme that links the seemingly unrelated passages of a given *sūra*. According to Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī of Pakistan (d. 1997) and Sayyid Quṭb of Egypt (d. 1966), each Qurʾānic *sūra* has a central idea as its unique message and around this idea every theme or topic within the *sūra* evolves: to elaborate, detail, exemplify, or explain.

Iṣlāḥī refers to this idea as an *ʾamūd* (pillar) and Quṭb uses *miḥwar* (axis), and it would usually be one of the ideas central to the message of Islam. It is irrelevant where in the *sūra* the verses expressing the central idea occur. It is the work of the interpreter to read, reread, and reflect on the meanings of the different sections until she has found out what the *ʾamūd/miḥwar* is. It is also the interpreter’s work to decide what the sections are, where they begin and where they end. What did not seem to be one of the aims was the establishment of a new structure for the *sūra*, one that corresponds to the location of the *ʾamūd* section and organization of the remaining sections around it. That remained random, or at least, linear.

These two scholars endeavor to explain every single passage of each *sūra* in relation to what they presume is the central idea. In addition to deep reflection on the meanings of verses and *sūras*, the two scholars suggest some methodological principles to guide the work of the interpreter. Iṣlāḥī, following on the work of his teacher Imām Farāḥī (d. 1930), stipulates six principles as grounding for any legitimate interpretation; they are listed in Mir (1986). Quṭb, on the other hand, emphasizes the significant role of context, which is also one of Iṣlāḥī's principles, in understanding the Qur'ānic text.

The works of Quṭb and Iṣlāḥī paved the way for today's scholars to begin their post-modern search for Qur'ānic textual relations with two very important ground rules in mind: (a) context plays a vital role in understanding the text of the Qur'ān and therefore should be carefully considered when trying to study any aspect of its meaning; and (b) *sūras* consist of passages, not only verses. The borders between passages are arbitrary but are possible to determine.

Two tasks have thus been set for today's scholars searching for and trying to unravel Qur'ānic textual relations: to establish a methodologically profound argument for section divisions of *sūras* and to try to explain the relations between these sections within context on rigorous theoretical grounds.

In the last two decades scholars have begun their search for identifiable thematic borders and points of intersection within the long *sūras*. Neuwirth (1981) pioneered the explicit theoretical discussion of the division of Meccan *sūras* into distinctive subjects. Robinson (1996, 2000, 2001) applied a modified version of Iṣlāḥī's theory to *sūra* 2, and later analyzed the section division of *sūras* 6 and 23, producing a more linguistically and contextually aware explanation of section divisions and textual relations in the three *sūras*. Zahniser (2000), with special interest in *sūras* 2 and 4, and with reference to Robinson's and Iṣlāḥī's works, scrutinizes their section divisions, proposing new structures to the *sūras* and making some enlightening remarks on patterns and markers of section divisions.

El-Awa (2005) works on the same issue with an analysis of *sūras* 33 and 75 in an attempt to propose a theoretical framework for an interpretation based on understanding the mutual role of the passages as context to each other, focusing once again on trying to find more definitive markers of beginnings and ends of sections and, in doing so, adding a number of indicators to Zahniser's list and introducing a new linguistic framework for explaining Qur'ānic textual relations. The structure of *sūras* suggested by this work is more an interwoven fabric than a chain of topics or a core around which various objects revolve. Each linguistic unit adds to the recipient's understanding of the other units, not just to the immediately preceding one. Thus, understanding the Qur'ānic text is more a cumulative than a linear process.² This work analyzes how this cumulative process works from a cognitive linguistic point of view.

More recently, Nevin El-Tahry (2010) paid attention to the "holistic" approach as an important addition to modern methodologies of understanding the unit of long Qur'ānic *sūras*. She applied this method to the longest Qur'ānic *sūra*, al-Baqara, emphasizing the *sūra*'s central theme being key to uncovering the *sūra*'s meaning and structure.

In the following sections, I show how, through relevance rather than linear coherence relations, the different parts of any given part of the Qurʾānic text contribute to understanding other parts of the same text.

A New View of Qurʾānic Structure

The matter of connectivity between parts of the multiple-theme Qurʾānic *sūras* has been a problem for scholars and commentators throughout the centuries. In their endeavor to find a suitable explanation for this problem, their main preoccupation has been the apparent disconnectivity of passages covering variant topics. They have tried to explain the structure of the Qurʾān in such a way that this appearance of disconnectivity would be removed, on the assumption that disconnectivity is a form of deficiency in literary texts.

In the rest of this chapter I want to move from this point of view to another. I want to establish by linguistic analysis that (a) the Qurʾānic *sūras* are composed of structurally independent (or disconnected) units and (b) that this characteristic does not really pose any threat to the perception of the Qurʾān as a highly literary text, nor does it affect communication of its message. Before I do so, however, it is important to define the units of the Qurʾānic discourse that I shall be discussing here. The peculiar format of the Qurʾān in *sūras* rather than chapters, and those *sūras* being composed of strings of verses with hardly any punctuation marks, rather than clearly defined paragraphs or sections, makes the question of connectivity between the elements a highly complicated one; it involves more than simply the question of the overall coherence of the text. One needs to know what the relations between those strings of sentences are, how they are represented, and what the role is of each one of them in forming the overall message of the *sūra*.³

In what follows, I shall focus on textual relations between verses in the Qurʾānic *sūra* as they appear in their text; I shall not try to group them in sections or paragraphs. The aim is to show, by close examination, a special characteristic of sentence structure in the Qurʾān, and then to suggest that the same applies to units larger than a sentence.⁴ Equally, verses that are composed of units smaller than the sentence are not discussed here.

Textual relations

Text is composed of linguistic units of various lengths, the smallest unit being a word and the largest being a text. A number of words linked together make a sentence; a number of sentences normally make a paragraph; a number of paragraphs make the text.

Sentences within paragraphs, and paragraphs within texts, are usually expected to have some kind of connection with each other. This connection may be semantic, structural/grammatical, or both. When the relation between two units (sentences or paragraphs) is

expressed physically, in actual words or marks (such as punctuation marks that act as connectives), I will refer to it as “structural.” Connectives indicate to the reader what the author of the text thinks the relation between the two units is. On the other hand, when no such indicator is apparent in the text and the relation can be understood only from the meaning, I will refer to it as “semantic.” Sometimes the two types of relations are combined, and sometimes they are not. Our understanding of textual relations in a given text is based on observation and understanding of these two types of relations.

There are four logical possibilities for these two types of relations working together within text. A relation between two units may be evident in the explicit words and meanings of the two units; or it may be evident in either of them; or it may be unclear in either of them. Thus, I divide these four possibilities into four categories, each representing one possibility. In the following four sections I will show how such relations are formed and discuss their effect on the recipients’ understanding of textual relations. I will use a variety of examples from everyday conversation, literary texts, and the Qur’ān. It is important to bear in mind that the majority of textual-relation problems arise when the relation is not clear between two sentences that come at the point of thematic transition. Since the aim of this chapter is to examine the causes of the problem and how it occurs from a linguistic point of view, and in order to avoid the added complexity of the question of where sections actually begin and end, simple examples from any location in the text suffice to illustrate the situation. The analysis and the problems, however, apply to points of transition between sections and themes as much as they apply to any two sentences in the text.

Semantic and structural connectedness

The first category of relations I introduce here is that of semantic and structural connectedness, which is where both the meaning and the connectives work together to indicate the relation between two sentences. When sentences are linked together using cohesive ties, such as “and” or “therefore,” they are grammatically connected; there is a clear relation between them and one or more words are used to indicate this relation. Such words are known in general linguistics as cohesive ties and they create structural connectivity. Without cohesive ties sentence relations might not be equally clear to all readers.

Consider the following examples:

Sentence 1 Ahmad is the tallest.

Sentence 2 He is six feet tall.

The two sentences are full grammatical sentences and can be used completely independently of one another. We may understand sentence 1 with reference to two persons indicated by the speaker in a context where both the hearer and the speaker know who the second person is, and where “he” in sentence 2 is a reference to a third person, outside the comparison in sentence 1, who is six feet tall. In this case, the two sentences are not at all connected and so are unconnected grammatically and semantically.

However, we may think of another scenario in which the two sentences are used in connection with one another, if “he” in sentence 2 is understood to be a reference to Ahmad, the subject of sentence 1, in which case we assume that the height of the second person is known to both the speaker and the hearer and is less than six feet.

A writer using the two sentences may wish to make sure the relation between the two sentences is clear to all readers beyond doubt, by using the word “as” in the function of a cohesive tie:

Sentence 3 Ahmad is the tallest as he is six feet tall.

Or, he could do so by using the semi-colon:

Sentence 4 Ahmad is the tallest; he is six feet tall.

In both sentences 3 and 4 the cohesive tie used indicates that the pronoun “he” must be a reference to the noun at the beginning of the first sentence, and so the two sentences are seen as dependent in terms of both their meanings and their grammatical structure.

This type of structure is often used in the Qur’ān but is not the most common category of cross-sentence relations in the Qur’ān. It is more common within long verses than across verses.⁵

Consider the following example (Q 2:5):

They are following guidance from their Lord
And they are the ones who will prosper.

The use of the conjunction “and” (*wāw*) before the second sentence indicates that the two occurrences of the pronoun “they” (*ulā’ika*) refer to the same people. However, an additional aspect of the relations between the two sentences may be inferred. The second sentence may be a consequence of the first. Those who follow the guidance from God are those who will succeed. Their success follows from their choice to follow the guidance, rather than just being an accidental conjunct/coordinate as would be indicated without the inference of this additional connotation of the relation. Accordingly, the *wāw* (“and”) in this context means “so” or “therefore.”

However, this example, in spite of the ambiguity of the relation resulting from the choice of *wāw* here, does not seriously hinder the understanding of the broad textual relations in the *sūra* because this verse occurs in the middle of a passage that is coherent overall. When such connectivity is apparent, whether in the middle or on the borders of passages, textual relations are not normally problematic for the reader. It is when the connection is between two consecutive sentences, each falling on the border of a passage, which have no apparent relation, either structurally or semantically or both, that the recipient fails to work out why one of those passages should follow the other. The discussions of the following two categories show how this happens.

Semantic and structural disconnectivity

The second category is opposite to the first, focusing on disconnectivity. When two different sentences are grammatically unconnected and when their meanings are not clearly related, they are considered to be semantically and structurally disconnected.

If a sentence is part of a text with which the reader cannot see its connection, either grammatical or semantic, it is thought to be incoherent with the text. This is similar to the case of the second section of the *sūra* discussed at the beginning of this chapter. However, there might be some more obscure semantic relation(s) holding between such a sentence and the text to which it belongs. In that case, it is said that the meaning of this relation is open to interpretation. This feature is more common in literary language. However, if the relation is too hard to work out, it is often thought that the text is incoherent. Applying this to my initial example, it is clear that verse 16 has no apparent connection with verse 15, and verse 19 has no apparent connection with verse 20. The two sections as a whole have neither a structural nor a semantic relation between them.

15 Even though he might tender his excuses.

16 Move not your tongue to hasten with it.

17 Verily, upon Us is its gathering and its recitation.

18 Thus, when We recite it follow its recitation.

19 And then, verily, it is upon Us to clarify it.

20 No indeed. But you love the world that hastens away.

It is useful in such cases to consider the overall meaning of a number of verses belonging to one section as one proposition expressed by this section, then to look for a possible semantic relation. But when a relation cannot be found, textual relations between those sentences are deemed problematic.

Semantic connectivity and structural disconnectivity

The third category is when the semantic relation between two sentences, paragraphs, or sections of a text is apparent but without any physical indication of this relation, that is, they are semantically related but structurally unrelated. In such cases, context is used to infer the relation between the two.

Consider the following example from a poem by Ott (1998):

Sentence 5 Look into my eyes.

Sentence 6 The same gradual fire.

Sentences 5 and 6 are two lines of a postmodern poem. Sentence 5 ends with a full stop indicating structural discontinuity. However, the reader is inclined to draw a relation

between the two sentences on the basis of several items of information drawn from outside the actual words of the text:

- a Seeing fire in someone's eyes is a common metaphor to indicate anger or other feelings.
- b The invitation to look into the speaker's eyes in sentence 5 must be to see something unusual in those eyes. People do not normally ask one another to look into their eyes for no reason. Sentence 6 provides a reason: the speaker wants the addressee to see the fire in her eyes.
- c Usually when two sentences are placed one after the other, recipients assume this particular arrangement must be due to their being related, particularly if there is no clear indication that the intention is otherwise.

For all these reasons, and perhaps there may be others too, one is entitled to think that sentence 6 comes by way of explanation of what is to be seen in the eyes of the speaker if the addressee agrees to the request made in sentence 5. On the other hand, it is possible that a different interpretation of the poem may explain the relation differently and even reach the conclusion that there is no such direct relation between the two sentences.⁶

It is not unusual to see this type of structure interpreted into a variety of meanings, since the author has, probably deliberately, not included within the text a clear indication of what the particular relation between the consecutive units of text is. Because different readers process the text using different sets of assumptions, in the absence of any guidance from the text it is to be expected that they would arrive at different interpretations. Thus, the meaning of this kind of structure is inherently ambiguous.

This type of semantic relatedness and structural disconnectivity is the most common type of relations in the Qur'ānic text: many of the problems in the study of Qur'ānic textual relations are due to the inherently ambiguous nature of this kind of structure. Consider the following Qur'ānic example which occurs at a point of thematic transition in *sūra* 2 (Q 2:5–6):

- 5 They are following guidance from their Lord and they are the ones who will prosper.
- 6 Those who disbelieve, verily, it makes no difference whether you warn them or not: they will not believe.

Verse 5 is the end of the introductory section (verses 2–5), and verse 6 is the introductory verse of the second section of the *sūra* with an apparently new topic of the disbelievers.⁷ There are no words to indicate a direct connection between the two sections or to direct the reader to the type of relation intended. On the contrary, verse 6 begins with a “separator,” *inna*, rather than a connective. *Inna* is a sentence initial introducing a new subject and emphasizing the information content that is to follow.

However, the relation between the two sections is not seen as a problematic relation because there is a semantic connection holding the meanings of the two sections together. The first section speaks of the believers who accept the guidance of the Qur'ān and the next speaks of the unbelievers who do not do so. By way of comparison between

two kinds of people, the logical relation between the two different sections has been made clear and placement of the two as consecutive sections has been justified.⁸ As the following sections of the *sūra* unfold, this understanding of the relation is consolidated.

Semantic disconnectivity and structural connectivity

The fourth logical type of textual relations is where structural connectedness exists but with no obvious semantic relation. According to the function of cohesive ties as indicators of semantic connectedness, it would be against the principles of communication to add a physical link between things that have no relation whatsoever. However, in some cases a connective is used, presumably indicating the existence of a semantic relation, where the semantic relation it indicates is not obvious. In this case, it is to be assumed that the linguistic connective is added to indicate to recipients that there is some fine relation between the two sentences but it is for the recipient to work it out.

Consider this example from Q 110:2–3.

- 2 When you see people embracing God's faith in crowds
- 3 then, celebrate the praise of your Lord and ask His forgiveness: He is always ready to accept repentance.

The relation in question is that between seeing people embrace God's faith (verse 2) on the one hand, and asking the Lord's forgiveness (verse 3) on the other. Grammatically, the two sentences are connected by the use of "when" (*idhā*) and "then" (*fa*), a grammatical structure that indicates the second sentence is a consequence of the first. But this connection is not very clear from the meaning of the two sentences; in the recipient's mind, seeing people embrace faith is not normally something that people would respond to by asking God's forgiveness. Religious people would ask for God's forgiveness when they commit a sin, not when they see other religious people.

I assume that it is because of this lack of clarity in the relation between the two sentences that commentators have often associated this *sūra* with a report that when Abū Bakr (Muḥammad's companion and friend) heard this *sūra* for the first time as a new revelation, he considered it an indication that the prophet would soon die. If the tradition is true, Abū Bakr's assumption would be based on establishing the missing semantic relation between the two sentences as follows:

- a The fact that crowds of people had started to embrace Islam indicates completion of the prophet's mission.
- b It is near their death that religious people tend to ask intensely for God's forgiveness.
Conclusion:
- c If the prophet's career has come to an end, and he is being asked to ask God for forgiveness, it must mean he is going to die soon.

Table 4.1 General categories of textual relations

	Structural relation	Semantic relation	Textual relations
1 Semantically related and structurally connected	Yes	Yes	Clear except when the connective is ambiguous
2 Semantically unrelated and structurally disconnected	No	No	Problematic
3 Semantically related and structurally disconnected	Yes	No	Possibly ambiguous
4 Semantically unrelated and structurally connected	No	Yes	Problematic

It is by working out which assumptions to use to fill the gaps between the meanings of the different sentences that one can make some sense of relatedness between them and hence justify their arrangement. However, if one fails to work out such helpful assumptions, relations between the sentences in similar structures remain highly problematic.

The reason for the ambiguity of Qur'ānic textual relations is therefore assumed to be that most of them belong to the second and third categories: they encompass complete and independent units of meaning lined up one after the other with few grammatical connectives, and with relations between those complete units of meaning that are not always straightforward and easy to work out.

Table 4.1 shows the four types of possible relations between sentences and their effects on recipients' understanding of textual relations.

Relevance (see Table 4.1)

In the above discussions and examples I have shown that a Qur'ānic *sūra* is composed of separate linguistic units whose relations are not always obvious, and have discussed a number of possible reasons for this lack of clarity. This now raises the question: how do such separate units make sense together in order to communicate the intended message of the text?

In order to answer this question I shall draw on a number of tenets from pragmatics, the discipline dealing with the contextual aspects of a text's meaning.⁹

Sentence meaning and the intended meaning

A central problem for the study of meaning is that sentence meaning vastly undermines a speaker's meaning. What this means is that the intended meanings of text are not understood simply by working out what the meanings of its units are. In fact, in most cases, the meanings of the words are only a very small aspect of the message communicated. Take for example the following sentence:

Sentence 7 It is raining.

There are many cases in which sentence 7 would not be taken as merely informative of the fact that it is raining. For example, if the speaker and the addressee were planning a picnic, the intended meaning would not be just to inform the hearer of the state of affairs that it is raining. Instead, it could be:

Sentence 7a The picnic will have to be cancelled.

In another scenario, if the speaker is responding by sentence 7 to sentence 8 below:

Sentence 8 I do not need to take my umbrella with me.

The intended meaning of sentence 7 would in this case be:

Sentence 7b Yes, you do need to take your umbrella with you.

Which is not what the words of the sentence say. Sentence 7, with its two scenarios, represents many other sentences that we use, hear, and read where understanding the meanings of their words is not alone sufficient to communicate the intended meanings. In both scenarios, if the hearer of sentence 7 took the sentence as merely informative of a state of affairs not related to her present situation, and continued preparing for the picnic or went out without her umbrella, communication of the intended meaning would have failed. In cases of successful communication of the intended meaning, the message communicated by the sentence is more than what its words simply said.

What is it, then, that one needs in order to work out the intended meaning of sentences? If we continue using the example above, we shall be able to see that it is the context of the conversation that is used, in both scenarios, to reach the correct understanding of the intended meaning. Sometimes this context comes from outside the text (first scenario), and at other times from the rest of the text (second scenario). In the first scenario, it is the information, known to both the speaker and the hearer, that they were planning to go on a picnic, and the general knowledge that people do not normally go on picnics while it is raining. In the second scenario, it is the speaker's knowledge of the hearer's intention to go out without an umbrella, as understood from sentence 8 being the preceding part of the conversation, and the common-sense knowledge that if people go out while it is raining they take umbrellas with them in order to avoid getting wet.

This brief analysis highlights three aspects of knowledge used in the comprehension of a text's intended meaning: (a) general knowledge/common-sense knowledge; (b) knowledge common to the speaker and addressee or writer and reader; and (c) knowledge from other parts of the text. Aspects (a) and (b) are non-linguistic context since information drawn from them does not form part of the text, whereas (c) is linguistic context because it draws on information gained by recovering the meanings of other parts of the text. These are three broad divisions of information from outside the text in question that recipients use to understand the intended meaning.

The role of contextual information

As we have seen above, recipients need contextual information to understand the intended meaning. If such information is not accessible to them, they are likely to fail to understand the speaker's intended meaning. Similarly, if recipients of the Qur'ānic text lack access to the knowledge they need to process the meanings of its language, they are unlikely to succeed in uncovering the intended meanings, including those meanings indicated by the relations between the themes/sections of *sūras*.

A verse such as "May the hands of Abū Lahab be ruined, and may he be ruined too" (Q 111:1) is not understandable in the absence of the knowledge of who Abū Lahab is, whereas the following verse (Q 111:2), "Neither his wealth nor his gains will help him," can be understood as a general reference to man, especially in the light of the fact that this reinforces a meaning central to the message of the Qur'ān; that is, if man does not believe in God and the day of judgment, wealth and worldly deeds will not be of any use to him on that day. Similarly, the third verse of the same *sūra*, "and so will his wife, the fire-wood carrier," would be understood metaphorically rather than literally, as is the case in its standard Sunnī interpretation, if one is not aware of the history of the situation commented on by the *sūra*. In fact, if information about the historical situation is not available to interpreters, the meaning of the whole *sūra* may be turned into an image of man and his female partner being punished in hellfire for their disbelief.

The only difference between the Qur'ān and any other text, literary or non-literary,¹⁰ in this respect is that the contextual information required for interpreting each text varies according to the nature of the text and its content. Advertising language, for example, is understood in the light of knowledge about modern daily life and commodities, whereas understanding contemporary media language requires knowledge of current affairs and modern lifestyles and a certain linguistic knowledge. A pre-Islamic poem would be understood by using contextual information from history and Arab culture of the time in addition to common-sense and general linguistic knowledge of Arabic. As for the Qur'ān, in addition to general linguistic knowledge of Arabic and Arabic language at the time of the revelations, knowledge of pre- and early Islamic Arab culture and history and basic Islamic knowledge (e.g., *ḥadīth* and *sīra*) are essential.

However, it is only reasonable to assume that not all recipients, given their varied backgrounds, will have access to all the information they need from outside the text. Thus, generally speaking, contextual information may be divided into two broad

types: linguistic or immediate context, and non-linguistic context. *Sūra* 111 above is an example of the latter. It remains to clarify what the linguistic context of the Qur'ān is.

As with any text, the linguistic context of any given part of the Qur'ān is the preceding and the following verses. Due to their physical proximity to the text in question they can be referred to as the immediate context. The information provided by the immediate context is naturally the most immediately accessible information that can be relied on for working out the meaning of the text in question, which gives it a prime role in the comprehension process. However, accessibility of contextual information does not guarantee successful communication. Indeed, most of those who have considered the text of the Qur'ān to be confused and incoherent were specialists in this particular field of knowledge, Arabic and Islamic studies.

Context and relevance

A major hurdle in the way of successful communication of the intended meaning is that there is often too much contextual information to choose from. To solve this problem, relevance theoreticians hold that human cognition has evolved in the direction of increasing efficiency and, therefore, out of the huge amount of information available to recipients of a text (via memory, perception, and inference), the most relevant will be selected and used in processing the language of the text in order to maximize relevance.¹¹ Relevance theoreticians define relevance as a property of text¹² that makes it worth processing. For a text to be relevant it has to make a difference to the recipient's cognitive environment, that is, it must enhance their knowledge of the world.

The outcome of the interaction between the propositions expressed by the text and information derived from context is known as "cognitive effect," of which there are three possible types:

- 1 Addition of new information to already existing knowledge.
- 2 Contradiction of already existing knowledge.
- 3 Confirmation of already existing knowledge.

Relevance is measured against two factors: the number of cognitive effects and the effort put into achieving them. The more the effects, the more relevant the text is, while the less effort one puts into processing an item of information, the more its relevance.

Consequently, the answer to the question of which items of contextual information to use in processing a unit of discourse lies in maximizing relevance. In other words, as an automatic cognitive process, recipients tend to choose the aspect of context that is most easily accessible and that will interact with the text to yield the maximum possible effects; it will enhance recipients' cognitive environment in the most possible ways.

Thus, in the case of sentence 7 above, to understand "it is raining" as merely informative of a state of affairs outside the recipient's situational context is to minimize the relevance of the utterance because it only adds one item of information to the recipient's general knowledge, an item that is not likely to enhance the recipient's knowledge of her

present situation. To understand it in the ways suggested above adds more to the recipient's existing knowledge both of the world and of her present situation, making it the optimal explanation of the sentence.

Similarly, the Qur'ān as a whole should be seen as a highly accessible source of information needed to work out the intended meaning of a given verse. Just as the preceding and following utterances in a conversation contribute towards understanding any part of it, previous verses provide background information for understanding a verse in question, and following verses soon act as context for those after them, the end result being that each part of the text is equally important for comprehension of all the other parts, because they reduce the effort required in the process of comprehension, thus maximizing relevance.¹³ The picture of the discourse, then, is as Diane Blakemore (1987: 112) describes it: "one in which the interpretation of utterance (that is the propositional content and its contextual effect) contribute towards the contexts for interpreting subsequent utterances. That is, as discourse proceeds, the hearer is provided with a gradually changing background against which new information is processed."

It is from this idea that the importance of the immediate context arises: information made accessible by the verses nearest to those being processed is easily accessible to the reader and so they help to minimize the costs of processing text for comprehension. So meanings achieved by using the immediate context are more likely to be the intended meanings. In a later section I shall shed more light on the role of the immediate context as a tool that speakers/authors use to direct hearers/readers towards their intended meanings, knowing that they are likely to use them before any other source of context.

Maximizing the relevance of Qur'ānic verses

The idea of maximization of relevance by increasing the cognitive effect of utterances is evident in the Qur'ān, and in particular in the relatively loose connections between verses. In accordance with the framework explained above, the greater the number of linguistic ties used to direct recipients towards a particular understanding of the intended meaning of a verse, the more restricted that verse will be to its immediate context. Such ties function as constraints on the relevance of the verse because the relation they create between the verse and the information surrounding it is effectively a limitation of interpretational possibilities (as they direct the recipient to select one particular item of contextual information and ignore all the others). On the other hand, the fewer restraints there are, the greater the potential for multiple interpretations and the more universal the intended meaning of the message becomes.

Universal meanings and loose ends

The majority of Qur'ānic verses feature what is known in the study of Arabic literary styles as *ījāz*, that is, a property of literary language whereby the maximum possible meaning is encompassed in the minimum possible number of words to produce high

intensity of meaning and a kind of universality that would allow the same sentence to be used in multiple contexts.¹⁴ The detailed discussions of *ījāz* in Arabic rhetoric come to the conclusion that *khayr al-kalām mā qalla wa dall* (“the best composition is the least in size but the greatest in semantic outcomes”). As such, this criterion takes into consideration the size of the utterance/text to be processed for comprehension relative to the outcome of the comprehension process and is thus vaguely similar to the notion of relevance, with the contextual information factor omitted. By default, the stylistic feature of *ījāz* requires authors who aim at the best literary language to maximize the effect of their sentences. It requires sentences to lead to the inference of more meanings so that, to use relevance theory language, the reader perceives them to be worth her while and is therefore prepared to put time and effort into processing them.

The majority of Qur’ānic verses express universal meanings and refer to situations whose occurrence is likely for everyone at some point in time. The text’s use of very few linguistic connectives allows it to live up to its promise to be a message for humanity applicable in all places at all times. Consider, for example, the verses on Islamic dress code (Q 33:53, 55, 59; 24:30–1, 60). The generalized and broad manner in which the verses are phrased only enhances the flexibility of their application. The addition of any details to the texts would impose more constraints and hence limit applicability. When information from the relevant contexts such as *ḥadīth* and *sīra* is employed to explain the intended form and shape of women’s dress, it only re-emphasizes the broadness of these limits. Several items of information (from various narratives) are available concerning the wide variety of dress that women wore during the lifetime of Muḥammad. This must mean to the Islamic legislator that an equivalent level of variety and flexibility should be permissible in modern days. Any limitation of this flexibility would be against the texts’ intended meaning as indicated by the way they are phrased and by their context.

The same method of understanding works for the way textual relations are structured: the lack of obvious ties between verses leaves them as free agents, to be used in any possible context. The more a verse is tied to its immediate context, the less its applicability outside that particular context. The loose structure of Qur’ānic texts has the effect of maximizing the cognitive effects of verses by making them true and valid for contexts other than their immediate ones.

This quality has resulted in the fact that Qur’ānic expressions have become highly quotable in a huge variety of contexts, sometimes even in situations that are not in the slightest related to the original contexts in which they occur. For example, it is very common to see on the façades of juice shops in the Arab world the Qur’ānic phrase (Q 37:46): “White, delicious to those who taste it.” If this verse were phrased more tightly so as to link it with its immediate context by including a specific reference to which drink and where it is, it would not have become possible for juice sellers to use it so wittily! One could very easily compose a long list of such examples, which would prove the same point; the deliberate lack of constraints on the structure of the Qur’ānic text is one major factor contributing to the effectiveness of the communication of its universal message.

Conclusions

A close analysis of the structure of verses in Qur'ānic *sūras* reveals that they do indeed have a distinctly loose structure, but one which is explicable in terms of maximization of the effect of those verses on recipients' understanding of the whole text of the Qur'ān and hence their own cognitive environments.

This is not to suggest that the answer to the ultimate question of whether Qur'ānic *sūras* possess textual relations is that they do not. On the contrary, Qur'ānic textual relations within any given *sūra* are explicable through a different understanding of the role of the linguistic/Qur'ānic unit known as a "verse" as a source of contextual information that can be used to aid comprehension of the Qur'ānic meaning both in the same *sūra* and in other *sūras*. The role of verses as contexts to one another is the justification of their own relevance. In any sequence of verses, the proposition expressed by a preceding verse is an "immediate context" that is automatically used by recipients in processing any following verse. When a verse is read, its words, or general meanings, work as a stimulus directing the brain to access other verses, which would have been read previously, to be used as sources of contextual information needed to assist in recovering the meaning of that verse.

The traditional view of the comprehension process requires Qur'ānic verses to be superficially connected regardless of the effect this may have on the delivery of the overall intended message. The framework of understanding I have proposed here gives rise to an appreciation of the mutual role of verses as the most accessible sources of contextual information. This mutuality leads to the minimalization of the effort put into the comprehension process, and thus justifies their relevance.

Notes

- 1 Robinson (1996: 138ff.) tries to draw a connection between the two sections from the repetition of words derived from the stem "hasten" but he fails to reach a definitive conclusion because of the lack of other affirmative indicators. For a detailed discussion of the structure of this *sūra* see also Robinson (1986) and El-Awa (2005).
- 2 The term cumulative was used by Barlas (2002) in describing how best to understand the Qur'ān's view on a topic, following the hermeneutist Paul Ricoeur (1981); for more details see El-Tahry (2010).
- 3 A similar question regarding cross-*sūra* relations arises here, but is not within the scope of this chapter.
- 4 In El-Awa (2005), I have treated the section and the paragraph as possible units of the Qur'ānic *sūra* and shown how sections may be equal in value to sentences in that they also express one proposition that makes a contribution to the overall meaning of the *sūra*.
- 5 Though it is rare, we may observe some tendencies and detect certain literary effects for whose achievement this particular structure of relations is used across verses. For example, the connection is often "and," which, in Arabic, indicates the mere existence of a relation, without stipulating what this relation is. This function is similar to the function of a semi-colon joining two sentences. In many cases, therefore, textual relations remain ambiguous to some extent.

- 6 This analysis does not take into consideration the rest of the poem, which might lead to the inference of a completely different meaning.
- 7 In order to maintain the flow of the discussion, and because section divisions are not in question here, I do not question them. Instead, I use the topic as a broad indicator of switches in subject matter. In another analysis, one that is dedicated to determining where sections end and begin, one would be obliged to rely on many more indicators than I do here.
- 8 Indeed, in Robinson (1996: 200ff.) the two sections are considered parts of one major section of the *sūra*.
- 9 The views and analysis of examples in this section are based on relevance theory as explained by Sperber and Wilson (1995, 2004).
- 10 Fabb (1997) shows how the process involved in understanding everyday language is not different from that involved in understanding literary language. The same principles of human communication are in operation. In El-Awa (2005), examples from Arabic literature have been used to establish the same point.
- 11 This is based on the cognitive “principle of relevance” that human cognition tends to be geared towards maximization of relevance.
- 12 The theory extends to other aspects of human communication, but for the purpose of this chapter, and to avoid confusion, I refer only to text.
- 13 According to this understanding, Qur’ānic repetitions are highly effective tools of maximizing relevance. Each repetition provides access to other occurrences of the same theme, phrase, or word in other places of the Qur’ān and in so doing it adds the effects of the contexts of the repetitions to the present context resulting in more cognitive effects. For more details on this role of repetition see El-Awa (2004).
- 14 The most typical Qur’ānic example favored by almost all classical critics and linguists who have written on this stylistic feature is the infamous Qur’ānic statement commending capital punishment as a gift of life for those who possess wisdom (Q 2:179): “Life is in fair retribution.” Books have been written to elaborate how and why this verse is considered the peak of Arabic eloquence, but what concerns us here is that it represents the ultimate example of how a few words can, through their interaction with the right set of contextual information, express an infinity of meanings related to a huge legal and human argument about why the existence of capital punishment is beneficial for society.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 5

Patterns of Address

Rosalind Ward Gwynne

To the extent that Muslims regard the Qurʾān as a blessing for all humanity, they consider that its every word addresses the audience in some fashion. Over the centuries scholars have exhaustively analyzed these ways, classified them, and distinguished them from or assimilated them to one another. Classical works on Qurʾānic sciences deal with patterns of address (*khiṭāb*, *mukhāṭabāt*) but do not always separate those parts that address the Qurʾān's audience from those in which one character in the Qurʾān addresses another, as in the exchanges between Abraham and his father.

In this chapter we shall examine the most prominent forms of address: vocatives and those whom they designate, imperatives and the actions they prescribe, and the effects that the passages have on their intended audiences. Muslim scholars did not confine a passage to a single category, however; they were acutely aware that a historical precedent or a parable, for example, though in the form of a third-person narrative, is a form of address, and its surrounding apparatus places it in one or more of the first three categories.

My two principal sources for this chapter, besides the Qurʾān itself, are the encyclopedic *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* ("The Proof in the Qurʾānic Sciences") by the Egyptian Shāfiʿī scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392), and *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* ("The Perfection in the Qurʾānic Sciences") by his successor Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who credits al-Zarkashī generously in the introduction to *Itqān* but rarely mentions him in context, even when he lifts whole passages from *Burhān*. While making my own additions, deletions, and rearrangements, I shall nevertheless rely upon these works for two reasons. First, in dealing with the Qurʾān as a whole they do

not classify a given passage under a single rubric but where possible offer multiple analyses. Second, adopting their approach acquaints the reader with not one but two levels of Islamic discourse, the Qurʾān itself and the methods of classical Qurʾānic scholars.

Particles, Pronouns, and Other Methods of Designating the Audience

Who is the audience for the Qurʾān? The first, of course, was the prophet Muḥammad, and the first revelation was, by most accounts, a command to him: *iqraʾ*, “Read!” or “Recite!” As we shall see, the most common command in the Qurʾān is understood to be directed at the prophet as well: *qul*, “Say!” In countless passages, the Qurʾān famously shifts from general to particular, from singular to dual to plural, and from first to second to third person, offering scholars the opportunity to disagree over both textual and extra-textual referents. The beginning of al-Zarkashī’s and al-Suyūṭī’s chapters on patterns of address (chapters 42 and 51, respectively) make the basic distinction among all these possibilities: is the addressee general (*āmm*) or particular (*khāṣṣ*)? These are not synonymous with “plural” and “singular,” however, for al-Zarkashī includes both categories. “It is God who created you (*khalaqakum*), then gave you sustenance” (Q 30:40). “O humanity (*yā ayyuhā ʾl-insān*)! What has beguiled you (*mā gharraka*) from your gracious Lord?” (Q 82:6). The addressee in both is generic, but only the first uses the plural, second-person pronoun to refer to the addressee (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 349).

The particular, likewise, may be either grammatically plural or singular. All humanity will see the day of judgment, but only those bound for hell, with faces black and gloomy, are addressed at the end of Q 3:106: “Did you [plural] disbelieve after believing?” There is only one possible addressee in Q 5:67: “O apostle (*yā ayyuhā al-rasūl*)! Deliver the message that has been sent down from your Lord” (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 349).

The non-identity of general and particular with plural and singular generates al-Zarkashī’s next two considerations. The first concerns passages that appear to address a particular person but are in fact directed at a general audience, while the second notes general forms that actually address particular persons or groups. One of the best-known examples of the former comes in Q 65:1: “O prophet (*yā ayyuhā ʾl-nabī*)! When you [plural] divorce women...,” followed by several long verses concerning the laws of divorce. As al-Zarkashī says, “The discourse opens with the prophet, while the intended audience is whoever is in a position to divorce” (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 349).

A much more difficult verse is Q 33:50 on the subject of legal marriage: first the prophet is addressed, then women whom “you” (masculine singular) may marry, then women who are legal only for the prophet. Al-Zarkashī quotes Abū Bakr al-Ṣayrafī (like al-Zarkashī, a Shāfiʿite, d. 330/941–2): “The beginning of the address is to [Muḥammad], and when it said that the one who gives herself is ‘only for you’, he knew that what came before that was for himself and others” (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 350).

Certain “general” references may, in fact, be particular, leading to various controversies. For example, a long verse in *sūrat al-nisāʾ* enumerates the women whom a Muslim man may not marry. It begins, “Forbidden to you are your mothers and daughters,”

but, in effect, it exempts new converts from divorcing wives within these degrees, as it ends with the phrase “except what has gone before; God is Forgiving and Merciful” (Q 4:23). Al-Zarkashī occasionally engages in the popular practice of identifying particular individuals associated with seemingly general verses. He says that Q 2:13 – “When it is said to them, ‘Believe as the people believe’ [they say, ‘Shall we believe as the fools believe?’]” – actually refers to ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām, a rabbi who eventually accepted Islam (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 352; cf. Guillaume 1955: 240, 262).

Many examples of general and particular concern matters of law, and, though al-Zarkashī does not say so specifically, interpretation depends largely upon legal reasoning that was not systematized until centuries after the revelation. He gives a short example from *sūrat al-nisāʾ*: “O people, fear your Lord” (Q 4:1) but says, “Children and the insane are not included” (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 352). Particularization of a general rule might come at the end of a verse (e.g., Q 4:4: “And give women their dowers...but if they freely give some back, then take it”) or at the beginning (Q 2:229: “Divorce is only permissible twice; after that...”). It might come from another verse in the same *sūra* (e.g., Q 8:16 and 65, concerning the obligation to fight in battle); or it might come from another *sūra* altogether. A passage in *sūrat al-baqara* stipulating that widows in general must wait four months and ten days before marrying again (Q 2:234) is qualified by one from *sūrat al-ṭalāq* that requires pregnant widows to give birth first (Q 65:4) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 352–3).

The scope of address decreases as al-Zarkashī progresses in his analysis. He isolates passages that address the genus (*al-jins*) but not every individual, the “species” (*al-nawʾ*), and the individual (*al-ʾayn*). The phrase “O people! (*yā ayyuhā ʾl-nās*)” in Q 2:21 (“O people! Worship your Lord who created you”), according to al-Zarkashī, applies to the genus but not to individuals who are not legally responsible; it predominates in addresses to the people of Mecca. A more delicate question is whether the same phrase in the command, “O people! Fear your Lord!” includes the prophet. Al-Zarkashī says that legal scholars have affirmed that it does. The command begins a *sūra* in the first half of the Qurʾān (*sūra* 4, *al-nisāʾ*) and a *sūra* in the second half (*sūra* 22, *al-ḥajj*); the first passage deals with creation, the second with the hereafter, “so consider this arrangement – how steeped it is in eloquence!” In still other contexts, the word may actually refer to “people of virtue, not those who are given the name ‘people’ out of tolerance” (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 356–7).

In this chapter, the only example al-Zarkashī gives of addressing the “species” is from Q 2:40, where God’s command to remember His benefits and keep His covenant is addressed to the Children of Israel but, he says, really means “the sons of Jacob.” Individuals whom God addresses include Adam (Q 2:35), Noah (Q 11:48), Abraham (Q 37:104–5), Moses (Q 7:144), and Jesus (Q 3:55). Muḥammad, however, is never addressed by his personal name but as *yā ayyuhā ʾl-nabī* (Q 8:64) or *yā ayyuhā ʾl-rasūl* (Q 5:41) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 357).

After a digression upon the topics of praise and blame, favor, humiliation, and sarcasm (discussed below along with other effects upon the audience), al-Zarkashī focuses upon increasingly intricate questions of audience identification. His analysis uses grammatical terminology – singular, dual, plural – to make even more minute distinctions

than the genus/species/individual division. A plural may be addressed in the singular, a singular in the plural, both singular and plural in the dual, a dual in the singular; or a combination may be addressed sequentially. Al-Suyūfī's contribution is to subdivide al-Zarkashī's five sections dealing with this topic into ten. Simply enumerating these possibilities hints at the potential exegetical challenges.

A comparatively simple example of addressing the plural in the singular is "O humanity (*yā ayyuhā ʾl-insān*)! What has beguiled you [singular] from your bountiful Lord?" (Q 82:6). That this is addressed to everyone al-Zarkashī proves by referring to Q 103:2–3: "Truly humanity (*al-insān*) is in a state of loss, except those who believe" (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 360).

Addressing a singular in the plural presents far more alternatives, hence more opportunities for disagreement. Thus, asserts al-Zarkashī, when God speaks to the prophets as a group – "O messengers (*yā ayyuhā ʾl-rusul*)! Eat of the good things and do good works" (Q 24:51–4) – he is really addressing Muḥammad, "because there was no prophet with him...or after him." "Those of favor and ample means among you" who must not refrain from helping family and the needy (Q 24:21) actually signifies Abū Bakr, who withheld share of a veteran Badr from him for his involvement in the slander of ʿĀ'isha (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 361; cf. Guillaume 1955: 495–7). The prophet is sometimes addressed in the plural (Q 11:14, 13), and God may be addressed and speak of himself in the "plural of majesty" (Q 23:99; 43:32; al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 361–2). Yet we note that the most commonly repeated *sūra* addresses God in the singular: "It is You [singular] Whom we worship and You whom we ask for help" (Q 1:5). Other possible plural audiences include humans and *jinn* (Q 6:130; al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 363).

Examples of singular and plural addressed in the dual and dual in the singular come from passages concerning Moses and Aaron (e.g., Q 10:89; 20:49), but at least one refers to a dispute between two of Muḥammad's wives (Q 66:4).

Perhaps the most convoluted example of sequential address (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 365–7) comes in Q 10:87: "We revealed to Moses and his brother, 'Provide houses for your [dual] people in Egypt; and make your [plural] houses places of worship and perform prayer [plural]; and give [singular] good news to the believers.'"

Sometimes one person – Muḥammad or another – is addressed when the intended audience may be someone else. Al-Zarkashī disposes of anything that seems to contradict Muḥammad's immunity from sin (*iṣma*): "'O prophet! Fear God and do not obey the unbelievers and hypocrites!' (Q 33:1): the address is to him but the believers are meant; because he was pure; far be it from him to obey the unbelievers and hypocrites!" This point, al-Zarkashī says, is proven by the next verse. Other verses treated similarly include Q 10:94 and 104, and 9:43 (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 367).

To illustrate how the Qurʾān goads its audience to awareness, al-Zarkashī cites passages that invite "contemplation" of sacred history or other phenomena. Thus Šāliḥ addresses his people after their destruction by earthquake (Q 7:79); the prophet is told to say, "Travel in the earth and see [how God originated creation]..." (Q 29:20); and all are told to observe the fruits of the earth as signs for believers (Q 6:99) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 368–9; cf. Gwynne 2004: 25–58).

Al-Zarkashī next covers instances in which the Qurʾān addresses one person, then turns to another. Most useful for our purposes is one of al-Suyūṭī’s examples: “We have sent you [singular] as a witness, a bringer of good tidings, and a warner, so that you [plural] may believe in God and His apostle” (Q 48:8–9). First God speaks to the prophet, then turns to human beings in general (al-Suyūṭī 1951: II, 34; cf. al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 369).

The next related topic is *talwīn* (“variegation”). Without first defining the word, al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 369) cites only two short examples that he has already used in other contexts: “O prophet! When you [plural] divorce women...” (Q 65:1) and “Who is your [dual] Lord, O Moses?” (Q 20:49). But then he notes that rhetoricians call this *iltifāt* and that he will deal with it under that heading. Indeed he does, in a section that is eighty-six pages long! He begins by describing the purpose of *iltifāt*:

It is the transition of speech from one style to another, rendering it fresh and abundantly rich for the hearer, renewing his vital energy, and safeguarding his mind from the boredom and irritation that the persistence of a single style [would have] on his hearing. (al-Zarkashī 1988: III, 380)

More specifically, it signifies the abrupt transition from speaking in the first person (*takallum*) to the second (*khiṭāb*) or third (*ghayba*), or any combination thereof; the great length of the section gives some idea of the differences of opinion possible when interpreting such passages. A single example must suffice, from a description of the joys of paradise. “Enter [plural] the garden, you [plural] and your spouses, to be made glad... Dishes of gold and cups will be passed among them...And you [plural] will be there eternally” (Q 43:70–1); first comes an address in the second person, then a third-person narrative, then another second-person address.

Is the audience only human beings? Al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 369–70) illustrates “addressing inanimate objects as a rational being would be addressed” by citing Q 41:11, “He said to [the sky] and the earth, ‘Come willingly or unwillingly!’ The two of them said, ‘We come willingly.’” There are disagreements, he says, as to whether this is meant literally or metaphorically, but the wording cannot be denied: sky, earth, and mountains (Q 34:10) are addressed as members of God’s audience.

The attention that Muslim exegetes and rhetoricians have devoted to every letter of the Qurʾān is epitomized in these systematic examinations of all possible Qurʾānic formulae of designating the audience, with all their possible interpretations from the most concrete to the most speculative, excluding only the possibility of human authorship. The impatience and preconceptions of some non-Muslim scholars of Islam have often prevented them from seeing such change and variety in the text as anything other than an exasperating inconsistency.

Effects on the Audience

After the Qurʾān designates the audience for a given passage, how does the discourse proceed? Al-Zarkashī treats the broad topic of Qurʾānic rhetoric in his chapter 46, which occupies nearly half of the book’s four volumes; that is where we find his

treatment of *iltifāt*, for example. In chapter 42, however, he arranges the remaining categories of address according to the effects they are intended to produce rather than their rhetorical patterns.

He begins with “praise” (*al-madh*). Interestingly, this is where he classifies all passages beginning with the phrase “O you who believe” (*yā ayyuhā ḥladhīna āmanū*), which occurs some ninety times in the Qurʾān. According to al-Zarkashī, this formula addresses

the people of Medina who believed and performed the *hijra*, to distinguish them from the people of Mecca. As mentioned previously, every verse in which *yā ayyuhā ḥl-nās* occurs is for the people of Mecca; and the reason for that is that after *yā ayyuhā ḥl-nās* comes the command for basic belief, while after *yā ayyuhā ḥladhīna āmanū* comes the command for the particulars of the religious law. (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 357)

Al-Zarkashī also includes here the passages in which God addresses Muḥammad, whether as prophet (*yā ayyuhā ḥl-nabī*, Q 8:64) or as messenger (*yā ayyuhā ḥl-rasūl*, Q 5:41), as appropriate for his role in the passage. Thus Q 5:67 deals with divine law appropriate for all: “O messenger! Convey what has been sent down to you from your Lord.” The other sort addresses the prophet as an individual: “O prophet! Why have you forbidden [yourself] what God has made lawful for you?” (Q 66:1, concerning a disputed incident in Muḥammad’s family life; cf. al-Qurṭubī 1997: XVIII, 117–22).

Next, logically, comes “blame” (*al-dhamm*). “O you who disbelieved (*yā ayyuhā ḥladhīna kafarū*)! Make no excuses on this day! [You are only being paid back for what you have done]” (Q 66:7). “Say: O disbelievers (*yā ayyuhā ḥl-kāfirūn*)!” (Q 109:1) “And because of the humiliation that it contains, it [i.e., direct address to unbelievers] does not occur in the Qurʾān except in these two places.” Al-Zarkashī contrasts this with how often believers are addressed in the second person, pointing out that in all other places those who reject faith are addressed in the third person:

turning away from them, as in His statement, “Say to those who reject faith that if they cease, they will be forgiven for what is past, and if they return [to their old ways] – well, the example of the ancients has already been set.” (Q 8:38; al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 358; cf. Gwynne 1993: 457, 459–60)

“Favor” or “honor” is dealt with briefly in only two examples, each of which is an invitation, one to Adam and his spouse (Q 7:19) and the other to the righteous (*al-muttaqīn*, Q 15:45–6), to enter the garden. “Humiliation” (*al-ihāna*) resumes the note of “blame” struck earlier. But these verses are addressed either to Iblīs (Q 15:36–7; 17:64–5) or to sinners in hell (Q 23:108), not directly to the Qurʾān’s audience who are hearing or reading the words in this life. Al-Zarkashī’s use of the term *ihāna*, “humiliation,” applies to one of only two instances in which disbelievers are addressed directly (Q 109:1; al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 359). For those in hell, however, such humiliation is part of the punishment (Gwynne 2002).

“Sarcasm” (*al-tahakkum*) is again mostly directed to residents of hell, where they are offered the “hospitality” of bitter fruit and boiling water (Q 56:52–6, 93), the “shade”

of black smoke (Q 56:42–3), and the “warmth” of hellfire (Q 56:94). An inhabitant of hell whom al-Zarkashī identifies as Abū Jahl is told, “Taste this! Truly you are the mighty (*al-‘azīz*), the noble (*al-karīm*)” (Q 44:49), using two of the divine names for one of the prophet’s chief enemies. As for those in the audience who hide their wealth rather than spend it in the way of God, the prophet is told, “Give them the good news of a painful punishment!” (Q 9:34; al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 359–60).

After completing his second sequence on identification of audiences, al-Zarkashī again discusses how the Qur’ān affects them. This sequence demonstrates how the text elicits positive results by the proper management of emotions usually classed as negative. One of these is called “provocation.” Characteristic of all his examples are phrases such as “if you are believers” and “if you are Muslims.” For example, Q 2:278 states, “O you who believe, fear God and give up what remains of the usury due you, if you are believers!” The author says, “He—may He be glorified—has already characterized them by belief when He addresses them, then said ‘if you are believers’ intending to prod them into abandoning usury, as it is proper for them to do that” (cf. Q 8:1, 41; 10:84; al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 370).

Al-Zarkashī’s next section deals with “affront”—literally, “causing rage” (*ighḍāb*)—against “those who fought you for your religion and expelled you from your homes and supported your expulsion” (Q 60:9); against Iblīs: “Do you take [Satan] and his progeny as protectors rather than Me?” (Q 18:50); and against the hypocrites: “They want you to reject faith as they have so that you will be like them” (Q 4:89) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 370).

Al-Zarkashī first defines the next topic, “encouragement and agitation,” as “encouraging one to distinguish oneself by fine qualities.” Q 61:4 states, “God loves those who fight in His path,” which applies to those who remain firm and pious in battle (Q 3:125), who do not turn their backs (Q 8:16) because they trust God’s promise of victory (Q 3:126; 4:104). On the other hand, those preparing to fight must also exercise prudence and deliberation (Q 2:195; 8:60). Finally, he glosses the title with a pair more familiar in theological texts, *al-tarḥīb wa ʾl-tarḥīb* (“awakening desire and arousing fear”), as found in the tales of reward of the blessed and punishment of the wretched (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 371).

What is more negative than fear? For al-Zarkashī it is a verse the purpose of which is “to render offensive.” When banning suspicion and slander among Muslims, the verse asks, “Would anyone among you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it!” (Q 49:12). Al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 371) notes the juxtaposition of positive and negative: the virtues of asking questions whose purpose is actually censure and reprimand, and the joining of extreme repugnance with brotherly love. It is not just human flesh, but one’s brother; and it is not just one’s brother, but one’s dead brother. Also, “the slanderer is addressed in the third person; thus he cannot rebut what has been said about him, so he is like the dead man.”

Now positive effects reappear, first “tenderness and affection,” and then “endearment.” The distinction appears to be that the former indicates God’s feeling for His servants, while the latter describes family relations. “Tenderness and affection” is illustrated by Q 39:53: “Say, ‘O my servants who have transgressed against their souls, do not despair of God’s mercy; [truly God forgives all sins].’” For “endearment,” the illustration is Abraham addressing his father concerning the latter’s gods (Q 19:42), Luqmān, his son on God’s knowledge and power (Q 31:16), and Aaron, his brother Moses on his

attempt to do Moses' bidding without causing a split among the Children of Israel (Q 20:94). Al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 372) compares these to the prophet's customary address to his uncle: "O 'Abbās, O uncle of the messenger of God!" In this section, the Qur'ān does not address its audience in the second person but demonstrates proper piety and respect with third-person examples that believers are to emulate.

Al-Zarkashī next covers three confrontational patterns: "challenge" or "exposing weakness," "causing grief and regret," and "exposing lies." "Challenge" (*ta'jīz*) has always had a special place in treatments of the "miraculous inimitability" (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān, because it dares the audience to produce a single *sūra* like it (Q 2:23), or ten *sūras* (Q 11:13), or indeed any speech (Q 52:34). It is understood in the text (Q 2:24; 11:14) and among Muslims that that condition has never been met. Al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 372) adds a challenge of more immediate concern to the audience, that of evading death. Those who did not fight at Uḥud say that their brethren who did and were killed could have avoided their fate; the Qur'ān answers, "Say, 'Then avert death from yourselves, if you are speaking the truth!'" (Q 3:168).

"Causing grief and regret" is not further defined and is illustrated by a single partial verse. "Say [to the hypocrites who bite their fingers in concealed rage], Die in your rage! God knows what is in your hearts!" (Q 3:119). But many other passages serve the same purpose, especially descriptions of hell that emphasize the mental states of its residents: God will not speak to them nor look at them on the day of resurrection (Q 3:77); or he will speak to them, but only to tell them, "God hates you more than you hate yourselves" (Q 40:10; Gwynne 2002).

"Giving the lie" contains only two verses and no definition, yet the second example is tied linguistically to an important covenantal element, that of witness. The first example challenges the Children of Israel to bring proof from the Torah that it was God and not they themselves who imposed their dietary laws (Q 3:93). The second example addresses polytheists: "Say, 'Bring your witnesses (*shuhadā'akum*) who will testify (*yashhadūn*) [that God has forbidden this]...'" (Q 6:150; al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 372). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Gwynne 2004: 12–13, 99–103; cf. Mendenhall and Herion 1992: 1181, 1184), the notion of witness is a basic component of the covenant between God and humanity and an important element in Qur'ānic legal reasoning (cf. Q 2:282–3 on contract law). The root *sh-h-d* occurs some 160 times in the Qur'ān, only rarely implying martyrdom (e.g., Q 57:19). Significantly, al-Zarkashī's first example of "challenge" also contains the first Qur'ānic occurrence of "witness": "If you are in doubt about what We have revealed to Our servant, then bring a *sūra* like it, and call your witnesses besides God if you are telling the truth" (Q 2:23).

The opposite of "humiliation" forms yet another category. "Conferring honor is everything in the glorious Qur'ān addressed by *qul* [Say!], such as in *al-qalāqil* [i.e., the *sūras* beginning with the word *qul*: 109, 112, 113, and 114]." The only example al-Zarkashī quotes is two words from *sūrat āl 'Imrān*:

"Say, 'We believe!'" (Q 3:84), and it is an honor from Him (may He be praised) to the whole Muslim community, in that He is addressing them without an intermediary so that all may gain the honor of being addressed. (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 372–3)

Construing the singular *qul* as an honorific address to a group is an original approach to a word that creates one of the most vexed questions of Qurʾānic rhetoric. Al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 373) explains his reasoning:

It would not be eloquent for the messenger to say to the one to whom he is sent, “The One who sent me said to me, ‘Say such-and-such’”; and because it could not be omitted, that indicates that it is intended to remain [in the text]. Thus there must be some reason for leaving it in, to be a command from the speaker to the one spoken to about that whereof he is to speak, a command which He gave orally with no intermediary, as when you say to one whom you are addressing, “Do this!”

Most occurrences of *qul* are presumably addressed to the prophet; al-Zarkashī’s only example, however, does not address the messenger alone but the entire community. Discussing this command, given in the singular to the community as a whole, partly avoids the logical problem of how the word “Say!” is both an instruction and part of what is to be said. The grammarian Ibn Khālawayh (d. 370/980–1), on the other hand, deals with the word as addressing only the prophet, whose name he understands to be interpolated: “Say, O Muḥammad, ‘Say, He, God, is One’” (Q 112:1). Perhaps it is no coincidence that two of the early codices, those of Ibn Masʿūd and Ubayy, are said to have lacked *qul* (Gwynne 2004: 81–2; Ibn Khālawayh 1960: 228; see also Radscheit 1997).

As a bit of an anti-climax but logically placed, al-Zarkashī’s last section concerns “addressing that which does not [yet] exist” (*al-maʿdūm*). “O sons of Adam” (Q 7:26), says al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 373), “is an address to people of that time and to all after them, somewhat like the procedure of giving counsel in a person’s address to his son, and his son’s son – whoever descended from him – to fear God and obey Him.”

But what of the instances in which addressing the non-existent is the very process that brings it into existence? “Our utterance to a thing, when We have willed it, is to say to it ‘Be! and it is (*kun fa-yakūn*)’” (Q 16:40, cf. Q 36:82, 2:117). The Shāfiʿī al-Zarkashī gives two solutions to the theological problem, one from the Ashʿarīs and the other from the ḥanafīs. The former hold that the existence of the world came about through the imperative *kun*, while the latter argue that “creation is eternal existing by the nature of the Creator...not that it comes into existence at [the letters] *kāf* and *nūn*.” The Ashʿarīs answer that if they were not separate, the word *kun* would have no meaning. The ḥanafīs reply that they are speaking of the reason that it exists and that it does not possess meaning by itself: saying that *kun* existed at creation is not the same as either comparing [God] to anything or denying all his attributes (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 373–4).

Patterns of Utterance

In chapter 45 on the patterns of Qurʾānic meaning, al-Zarkashī discusses the many ideas concerning its divisions: they are unlimited, there are only two, there are ten or nine or eight or seven, and so forth; he himself opts for six, which I have retained. We have already encountered all or most of them in examples of the patterns of address and production of psychological effects; now I shall briefly examine their grammar.

I must point out, however, that while other chapters in al-Zarkashī (1988) deal with such common literary topoi as “the literal and the metaphorical” (chapter 43), “metonymy and allusion” (chapter 44), “rhetorical styles” (chapter 46), and “grammatical particles” (chapter 47), the aim of chapter 45 is to distinguish form from meaning. Thus a sentence that has the form of an ordinary verb–subject or subject–predicate statement may in fact be a command, a blessing, a curse, a promise, or a threat. Space does not permit examination of all possible permutations and combinations of form and meaning – al-Zarkashī’s analysis runs to fifty-four pages – but I shall at least alert the reader to some significant distinctions.

Information

Al-Zarkashī (1988: II, 425) says that the aim of this first pattern “is to inform the addressee, but it is also pervaded by other meanings.” Comparisons between the Qurʾān, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament often turn on stories of the prophets, and it is usually noted that *sūrat Yūsuf* (12), “the most beautiful of stories” (Q 12:4–101), is the only one that consists (for the most part) of a single, continuous, third-person narrative. Nevertheless, it directly addresses the audience before (Q 12:1–3), during (Q 12:7, 22, 56–7, etc.), and after the narrative (Q 12:102–11). Many other *sūras* contain sequences of prophetic episodes (e.g., Q 6:74–90; 7:59–155; 19:41–58; 21 *passim*), and one might expect to find this sort of passage included under the rubric of information (*khābar*). But nowhere have I found that al-Zarkashī includes “stories,” except in a quotation. His priorities suit my purposes well, however, as they concentrate much more specifically on “address.”

Oddly, the first locution classed as information (*khābar*) is “wonder” or “astonishment”: Q 18:5, in denying that God has a son, states, “How excessive is the word that comes out of their mouths! They only speak lies!” This is a surprisingly long section because of theological questions implicit in the relevant grammatical structures. Briefly, one may be astonished by God’s works but not use such constructions as *mā aʿẓama ʾllāh* because of the grammatical implication that God was made great by something greater than He; and God may cause humans to wonder but not himself express wonder at his own works, since wonder arises from ignorance (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 425–8).

“Command” and “prohibition” may appear as simple subject–predicate sentences. “Divorced women shall wait for three monthly periods” (Q 2:228). “None shall touch [the Qurʾān] except those who are [ritually] pure” (Q 56:79). “Promise” and “threat” form another pair with important theological ramifications. “We shall show them Our signs on the horizons” (Q 41:53). This is al-Zarkashī’s sole example of the first, but it may, given its context, be interpreted equally well as an example of the second. “Those who do wrong – what a reverse they shall suffer!” (Q 26:227).

The single example of “rejection and rebuke” is, “Taste this! Truly you are the mighty, the noble” (Q 44:49). Already cited as “sarcasm,” it is an example of information delivered in the form of a command (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 429).

A number of *khavar*-locutions qualify as address only in an indirect sense, as examples of certain human speech-acts: prayer (*du'ā'*; e.g., Q 1:5), wish (*tamannī*; e.g., Q 7:53), hope (*tarajjī*) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 429–30, 432; cf. Gwynne 2004: 105–9).

The long section that al-Zarkashī calls “proclamation,” using the grammatical term for “vocative” (*nidā'*), combines many elements also found in chapter 42. He defines it as “the demand – by means of a special word – that the one addressed respond to the addressor, most often accompanied by a command or prohibition.” Most are indeed characterized by a particle: “O people (*yā ayyuhā 'l-nās*)! Worship your Lord!” (Q 2:21); but a subclass does omit it. Beside commands and prohibitions, there may be questions: “O you who believe, why do you say that which you do not do?” (Q 61:2). There may be information (*khavar*): “O My servants! There shall be no fear upon you” (Q 43:68); and there are other subclasses. He quotes al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) to the effect that all instances of *nidā'* are accompanied by some aid to understanding the religion; it is al-Zamakhsharī who, finally, includes the genre “stories” (*qiṣaṣ*) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 430–2).

Inquiry

The question with which al-Zarkashī begins and shapes this very long, much subdivided section is, “What is the difference between *istikhbār* [seeking information] and *istiḥām* [seeking understanding]?” Philologists’ answers turn upon points such as whether the question precedes the address or follows it; whether the question is worded positively or negatively; whether the point is explicit or implicit; and whether the purpose is affirmation, reproof, or rebuke, declaring two things equal, or one of the themes already mentioned.

God’s questions to the Qur’ān’s audience, of course, can hardly be requests for either information or understanding: the Lord only poses such questions to listeners in order to affirm them in their faith and remind them that they have learned the truth on that point. “Whose word is truer than God’s?” (Q 4:87) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 433). A prominent example of a negatively worded question comes in Q 7:172, the passage that establishes the covenant. “[God said] ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes (*balā*), we so witness!’” The presence of the word *balā* in this question is theologically crucial, as it is the proper particle for introducing an affirmative answer to a negative question. Had the reply been *na'm*, it would have meant “Yes, you are not our Lord” and would have constituted rejection of faith (*kuf'r*) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 439).

A number of earlier categories reappear in this section. God’s question to Jesus, “Did you say to the people, ‘Worship me and my mother as deities?’” (Q 5:116) is a rebuke to the Christians for claiming that Jesus was divine (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 441). A negative imperative is implied in Q 9:13: “Are you afraid of them? But God is more worthy that you should fear Him!” (II, 443). Motivation (“awakening desire”) is exemplified by Q 61:10: “O you who believe! Shall I guide you to a transaction that will save you [from a painful punishment]?” (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 444).

Condition

Conditional constructions are prominent in the Qurʾān; al-Zarkashī sets out eleven rules for them, again with multiple variants. As before, space allows for only basic examples of some of them.

His first rule is that a “full conditional statement” consists of two clauses of which the first is verbal and the second may be nominal or verbal. When they are combined, they form a single sentence: “And whoever, male or female, does good deeds and is a believer, they [plural] will enter the garden” (Q 4:124). “If you will help God, He will help you” (Q 47:7) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 453–5). The second rule is that it is the nature of condition and fulfillment that the latter depends on the former. “If you believe and ward off [evil], He will give you your rewards” (Q 47:36); this also illustrates the third and fourth rules covering the relationship of the two in time (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 456–60).

The fifth rule is that grammatical particles set up the conditional: “if” (*in*) or nouns that contain the same meaning, such as “whoever” (*man*), “whatever” (*mā*), or such adverbs as “wherever” (*ayna*, *aynamā*), “whenever” (*matā*), and so on. “So if (*fa-immā*) you fear treachery from any people, then cast [their covenant] back at them [so as to be on equal terms]” (Q 8:58). “If (*in*) [My enemies] find you, they will be your enemies, and stretch their hands and their tongues out against you with an evil purpose, and desire that you reject religion” (Q 60:2). The sixth rule is that an impossible or absurd condition must be joined with an impossible or absurd result. “If there were in [the heavens and the earth] a deity besides God, they would both have come to ruin” (Q 21:22) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 460–5; see also Gwynne 2004: 170–84).

Oath and consequent

Al-Zarkashī describes his next category, “the oath and its consequent,” as “two clauses with the same relation as the conditional antecedent and consequent.” He does not include full treatment in this section, however, but in chapter 46 on Qurʾānic rhetoric, a chapter that occupies nearly one-half of this four-volume work. Oaths form the eighteenth part of the first “style” analyzed, which is “emphasis.” Al-Zarkashī notes that in seven locations God swears by himself, in the rest by his creations. “Then, by the Lord of heaven and earth, it is the truth” (Q 51:23; cf. 10:53; 70:40). “But no! I swear by the setting of the stars – and that is a powerful oath, if you only knew” (Q 56:75–6). People have asked what role the oath plays, since the believer will believe simply by being informed, and the unbeliever will not profit from it. Al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) answered that judgment proceeds either by witness or by oath, and that both are in the Qurʾān. If it is asked how God can swear by created things when humans are forbidden to do so, there are three possible answers: that the expression “Lord of” has been omitted; that it was the custom among Arabs of the time; that one must swear by something greater than oneself, but God’s oaths all point to the Creator (al-Zarkashī 1988: III, 121–3).

What has usually been overlooked in discussions of Qur'ānic oaths is that oaths are an integral part of the covenant between God and human beings. "When your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves. 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we so witness'" (Q 7:172). Elsewhere I have discussed the topic of oaths at some length (Gwynne 2004: 16, 20–2, 103–5), but al-Qushayrī's pairing of witness and oath is one characteristic of the prototypical covenant in the Abrahamic/Mosaic religions (Mendenhall and Herion 1992: 1181–2, 1184–5). These two elements – God's oaths and evidence of the fates of earlier peoples – are what assure humans that God will keep his promises and carry out his threats, since there is no superior power to force him. Humans who abide by the covenant will be rewarded, because God has bound himself to do so.

Command

The covenant is the condition for every aspect of the relationship between God and humanity (Gwynne 2004: 1–24), particularly divine command. By most accounts, the first revelation to Muḥammad came in the form of a command: "Iqra' [Recite]!" (Q 96:1). We have already seen that God's very act of creation was a command, "Be (*kun*)!" given to an entity that did not yet exist (Q 16:40; cf. Q 36:82; 2:117). As Toshihiko Izutsu (1956: 52–3; see also Gwynne 2004: 67) has shown, command may actually be the primary mode of all speech. Commands have their own logic: the one who issues the command must have the authority to do so, and the command must be justified (Rescher 1966). In human terms, authority (or power) and justification are not the same thing, otherwise they amount to an argument from force, a classic fallacy (*argumentum ad baculum*). But that distinction disappears when both command and justification come from God. "He is not to be asked about what He does; it is they who are to be asked" (Q 21:23). The covenant is the assurance that God's acts are not arbitrary or capricious; in addition, much if not most of the Qur'ān is explanation for God's actions and – especially – his commands (Gwynne 2004: 67–82). "O people, worship your Lord Who created you and those who came before you, thus may you protect yourselves [against evil]" (Q 2:21). "Do not set up any other deity with God, lest you be thrown into hell, blamed and banished" (Q 17:39) (Gwynne 2004: 77).

Al-Zarkashī's treatment of commands here (1988: II, 474) is curiously short, no doubt because he has discussed them in so many other places. In the section on *khabar* in the same chapter, he specifically notes that the locution called "proclamation" often concludes with a command, as does the conditional clause. But a quick review of the verses previously cited will yield multiple examples of command in virtually every section.

Qur'ānic imperatives and other rules are so varied and inclusive that they are the basis for the structure of Islamic law, whether in the field of devotions (*ibādāt*) or that of transactions (*mu'āmalāt*). Legal scholars have determined that the Qur'ān commands, encourages, permits, discourages, and forbids particular actions; and while particulars of the "five types of action" (*al-aḥkām al-khamsa*) are beyond the scope of this chapter,

we may offer examples of each. “Your Lord has decreed that you [plural] worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents” (Q 17:23). The command to worship God is obligatory (*wājib*) and needs no elaboration, but it is worth noting that disobedience to parents is a cardinal sin, and that Q 17:23 is the first proof-text in that section of *Kitāb al-kabā'ir* (“Book of Major Sins”) by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348 or 753/1352–3; 1976: 41–9).

Extra acts of charity are the classic example of “recommended” acts. “If you give [extra] charity openly, it is good; and if you hide it and give it to the poor, it is better for you” (Q 2:271).

An example of a “permitted” action may be found in Q 24:60: “Such women as are past childbearing and do not hope for marriage, there is no blame upon them if they put aside their wraps...but it is better to refrain.” Al-Qurṭubī says of this passage, “They are permitted what is not permitted to others, and the trouble of observing a tiresome precaution is lifted from them” (al-Qurṭubī 1997: XII, 203). The usual example of a “repugnant” act is divorce, but let us examine a verse that represents the term more literally. “God has only forbidden you carrion and blood and the meat of pigs, and what has had the name of another deity invoked over it; but whoever is forced to, not wanting to and not repeating the act, there is no sin upon him” (Q 2:173). Al-Qurṭubī (1997: II, 151) says, quoting Mujāhid, “Forced to do it like the man seized by the enemy, when they force him to eat pork, or some other sin against God Almighty: the use of force permits that, to the utmost force.” A simple example of a “forbidden” action may be found in Q 5:72: “Whoever joins other deities with God, God has forbidden him paradise, and the fire will be his abode.”

Negation

Negation, says al-Zarkashī, is half of speech; the other half is affirmation. He does not include the negative imperative here, perhaps because he has included its one-line section as part of *khābar*, right after the positive imperative. Here he discusses points relevant only implicitly to Qur’ānic address: whether the negation is valid or invalid; whether it is general or particular; and whether the negative particle refers to the past or the future, “always more common than the past.” The believer will profit from contemplating both what God does and what he does not do, and what people have and have not done. “God does not destroy towns wrongfully, when their people are unaware [of the truth]” (Q 6:131). “We did not destroy towns except when their people were evildoers” (Q 28:59). “God does not change a benefit He has bestowed upon a people until they change what is in their hearts” (Q 8:53) (al-Zarkashī 1988: II, 474–9).

As more and more people claim the right to interpret the Qur’ān, analysis of Qur’ānic address is the first step to understanding audience response to the Qur’ān, as it is the first step to understanding the context of any passage. Such scholars as al-Zarkashī demonstrate where one may find freedom for interpretation and where one encounters the necessity for restraint.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 6

Language

Mustansir Mir

The Qurʾān's statement that it has been revealed in Arabic is the basis of the dogma that only the Arabic Qurʾān can be called the Qurʾān, that only the Arabic Qurʾān can be recited in prayers, and that only the Arabic Qurʾān can be the proper subject of study and interpretation. The dogma thus foregrounds the language of the Qurʾān, and this language is then taken as providing the principal access to the meaning of the scripture. Consequently, a thorough knowledge of Qurʾānic Arabic has always been regarded as a prerequisite for all areas of Qurʾānic scholarship – theology, law, history, and others.

The Qurʾān as a “Clear” Book

The Qurʾān calls itself a “clear” book. The Arabic word it frequently uses for “clear” is *mubīn*: The Qurʾān is *kitāb mubīn* or *al-kitāb al-mubīn* (“a clear book” or “the clear book,” Q 5:15; 12:1; 26:2; 27:1; 28:2; 44:2), its language is *ʿarabī mubīn* “clear Arabic,” Q 16:103; 26:195), and the prophet presents *al-balāgh al-mubīn* (“clear communication,” Q 5:92; 16:35, 82; 24:54; 29:18; 64:12); in two verses, *mubīn* is used as an adjective qualifying *Qurʾān* itself (Q 15:1; 36:69). The word *mubīn* means both “clear in itself” and “that which clarifies (something else).” Thus, the Qurʾān claims both that it yields its meaning unambiguously and that it elucidates matters, dispelling doubt and eliminating error. One must keep both meanings of *mubīn* in mind for a correct understanding of the Qurʾānic claim to be “clear.”

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Doubtless, many matters in the Qurʾān require explanation, the large number of commentaries written to explicate Qurʾānic thought and language being proof. The need for explanation remains even after allowing for the temporal gap between the present-day readership and Muḥammad’s first audience; the Qurʾān attests to companions of Muḥammad coming to him for elucidation of Qurʾānic verses, and there are anecdotes about companions spending long periods of time to study portions of the Qurʾān (for example, the reports about ‘Umar and his son ‘Abd Allāh; al-Qurṭubī 1967: I, 152). Furthermore, the Qurʾān itself says that some of its verses have a “firm” or “stable” meaning whereas others are “ambiguous” (Q 3:7).

If the Qurʾān indeed is a clear book, then how does one explain, on the one hand, the difficulty encountered by Muḥammad’s companions in comprehending parts of the Qurʾān and, on the other hand, the Qurʾān’s acknowledgment of the presence of ambiguity in it? The answer is twofold. First, the claim of any book to be clear does not necessarily mean that all its readers, regardless of their backgrounds – that is, their age, experience, mental acumen, level of knowledge, and linguistic ability – will understand it equally well or fully. Second, clarity is not to be confused with simplicity: a document will be called “clear” if it treats its subject in language that is clear relative to that subject. This brings out the relevance of the two meanings of the word *mubīn*. The Qurʾān is clear not only in a passive sense – “clear in itself” – but also in an active sense – it clarifies the particular subject it treats, it is suitable for presenting a certain subject, and judgment on its clarity should be passed with reference to that subject. In fact, in the case of the Qurʾān, the first meaning of the descriptive adjective *mubīn* – “clear in itself” – arises as a corollary of the second – “that which clarifies (something else).”

The language of the Qurʾān is “clear” in the sense that it presents its message clearly. This view is supported by each of the sixteen above-cited verses when read in context. For example, Q 5:15 tells the People of the Book that the Qurʾān is a “light” from God, the next verse adding that God “guides by means of it those who seek His pleasure.” The verse immediately following Q 12:1 reads: “We have revealed it [‘the Clear Book’ of verse 1] as an Arabic Qurʾān, so that you may use reason.” The words “so that you may use reason” (*laʿallakum taʿqilūn*) provide the rationale for revealing the Qurʾān in Arabic (the general rule governing the revelation of a scripture in a particular language is laid down in Q 14:4: “We have not sent a messenger except in the language of his nation, so that he might explicate matters to them”). The verse immediately following Q 26:2 is followed by “Perhaps you will strangle yourself to death [out of frustration] that they will not become believers,” again indicating that the issue of the clarity of Qurʾānic language has to do with the issue of belief and disbelief. What has been said about Q 5:15, 12:1, and 26:2 is true of the remaining thirteen verses cited. As remarked above, since “clarity” is not to be reduced to “simplicity,” the above-quoted verses cannot be taken to mean that Qurʾānic language will not raise issues of interpretation, that different readers will not understand the Qurʾānic text differently, or that the extensive historical discussion and debate about the various aspects of Qurʾānic language go against the Qurʾānic claim to clarity.

If the Qur'ānic claim to clarity pertains basically to message rather than to language, then the issue of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān (see Jeffery 1938; Watt and Bell 1970: 84–5) will appear in a different light. The view that the Qur'ān is free of non-Arabic words is based on such verses as Q 16:103, which says that the person whom Muḥammad's opponents have identified as his informant speaks a language other than Arabic whereas Qur'ānic language is *lisān 'arabī mubīn* ("clear Arabic language"). But even here, as in the verses cited above, the issue at stake is that of belief and lack of belief. First, Q 16:103 speaks of language in general and not of individual vocabulary items. That the language of a certain book is Arabic does not necessarily imply that that language does not contain a single word from another language; such a notion of linguistic purity has no Qur'ānic basis, and there are no reasonable grounds for denying the existence of well-attested linguistic relationships between the Arabic of the Qur'ān and other languages. Second, a Qur'ānic passage very similar to Q 16:103 is Q 26:192–9, which begins by saying that Gabriel has "brought it [Qur'ān] down to your [Muḥammad's] heart...in clear Arabic language [*bi-lisān 'arabī mubīn*]" but ends by explaining the purpose of the revelation of the Qur'ān in Arabic thus: "And had We sent it down on one of the non-Arabs and he had read it to them [Arabs], they would not have reposed belief in it." That is, had the Qur'ān been revealed in a language other than Arabic, its addressees, the Arabs, would have taken an easy alibi, arguing that, not knowing that language, they were incapable of judging or evaluating the Qur'ān and so could not be blamed for not accepting its message. The Qur'ān then is only saying that a nation receives scripture in its language; it is not addressing the issue of whether a given language includes or does not include words from another language.

Valorization

The language of the Qur'ān is both similar to and different from the language of pre-Islamic Arabia (cf. Watt and Bell 1970: 83–4). The vocabulary of the Qur'ān, though familiar to the Arabs, had a much smaller base – the number of the Arabic roots in the Qur'ān is well under two thousand – which made the Qur'ān accessible to a wider and more diverse audience. At the same time, that audience could not help but feel that the Qur'ān's language was markedly different from the language of their poets and orators. The Qur'ān invested ordinary words with special meanings, coined special terms, and then embedded these terms in a well-articulated worldview and placed them in a complex web of relationships. The net effect of this exercise was to create a coherent scheme of religious thought, the refashioned Arabic language serving as the gateway to that scheme. Thus, the language of the Qur'ān is best viewed as a vehicle for the expression of a set of philosophical, religious, and cultural perspectives that the Qur'ān introduced into the Arabian setting of the seventh century. In a word, the Qur'ān valorizes the Arabic language. This valorization, evident throughout the Qur'ān, occurs at several levels.

To begin with, serving as keys to the Qurʾānic discourse are terms of various types – terms that occur in the Qurʾān too often to need chapter-and-verse citation: (1) terms pertaining to faith and lack of faith: *hudā* (“guidance”), *ḍalāla* (“misguidance”), *īmān* (“belief”), *islām* (“submission”), *kufr* (“rejection of truth”), *nifāq* (“hypocrisy”), *mīthāq* (“covenant”), *al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm* (“the straight path”), *ḥaqq* (“truth”), *bāṭil* (“falsehood”), *fawz* (“success, salvation”), *khusrān* (“loss”); (2) terms designating people: *ahl al-kitāb* (“people of the book”); *aṣḥāb al-janna* (“people of paradise”), *aṣḥāb al-nār* (“people of hellfire”); (3) terms describing ritual practices and legal prescriptions: *zakāh* (“mandatory giving”), *ṣiyām* (“fasting”); *ḥudūd Allāh* (“the limits prescribed by God”); (4) attributes of the Divinity, as in Q 59:22–4; (5) terms representing the prophetic vocation: *rasūl* (“messenger”), *nabī* (“prophet”), *bashīr* (“giver of good tidings”), *nadhīr* (“warner”); (6) terms pertaining to the Qurʾān or to scripture in general: *sūra* (“chapter”), *āya* (“verse”), *furqān* (“criterion”), *āyāt bayyināt* (“manifest verses or signs”); (7) terms representing virtues and vices or virtuous and evil conduct: *taqwā* (“God-consciousness”); *iṣlāḥ* (“setting things right”); *fasād* (“corruption”); *ẓulm* (“wrongdoing”); *jihād* or *jihād fī sabīl Allāh* (“striving” or “striving in the way of God”); *infāq* or *infāq fī sabīl Allāh* (“spending” or “spending in the way of God”). Some of the Qurʾānic terms are multivalent, for example, *dīn*, which, depending on the context, may mean “allegiance,” “retribution,” “judgment,” or “religion”; *tawba*, which, depending on its subject, may mean “repentance” (of sin by a human being) or “forgiveness” (granted by God); and *shāhid*, which may mean “one who is present,” “witness,” or “martyr.”

At the next level, a large number of phrases and expressions not only sum up important aspects of the Qurʾānic worldview, but also frame the Qurʾānic discussions of matters. To take a few examples: (1) *li-llāhi mā fī ʾl-samāwāti wa-mā fī ʾl-ard* (“To God belongs all that is in the heavens and that is in the earth”); (2) *inna ʾllāha ʾalā kulli shayʾin qadīr* (“Indeed, God has the power to do all things”); (3) *inna ʾllāha maʾa ʾl-ṣābirīn* (“Indeed, God is with those who remain steadfast”); (4) *wa-ilā ʾllāhi turjaʾu ʾl-umūr* (“And to God are referred all matters”); (5) *aṭīʾu llāha waʾl-rasūl* (“Obey God and the messenger”); (6) *inna ʾlladhīna āmanū wa-ʾamilū ʾl-ṣāliḥāt* (“Indeed, those who have believed and done good deeds”); (7) *yaʾmurūna biʾl-maʾrūfi wa-yanhawna ʾaniʾl-munkar* (“They enjoin good and forbid evil”); (8) *ittaqu ʾllāh* (“fear God”); (9) *lā tattibiʾu khuṭuwāti al-Shayṭān* (“Do not follow in the footsteps of Satan”); (10) those who enter paradise – *lā khawfun ʾalayhim wa-lā hum yaḥẓanūn* (“They shall have no fear, and they shall have no regrets either”); (11) *jannātun tajrī min taḥtihā ʾl-anhār* (“gardens [of paradise] with streams flowing underneath”).

Also representative of Qurʾānic language are the sometimes long and often quite vivid passages describing, among other things, the following: (1) the phenomena of nature as evidence of such verities as the oneness of God (Q 2:21–2, 164) and the coming of the Last Day (Q 78:6–17; 81:1–14); (2) the conduct, in this world, of the believers (Q 70:22–34) and the disbelievers (74:43–7); (3) the rewards of heaven (Q 76:5–22; 88:8–16) and the suffering of hell (Q 88:2–7); (4) the punishment stories of unbelieving nations of former times (for example, in *sūras* 11 and 26).

Another form of the Qur'ānic valorization of the Arabic language may be called sublimation. Often, the Qur'ān takes a well-known expression and, by subtly modifying it or using it in a new context, raises it to a higher plane of meaning. Let us look at a few examples.

The Arabs compared a backbiter to a carrion eater. The phrase *akala laḥmahū* (with variations) occurs in their poetry in the sense of “to backbite” or “to slander” (Mir 1989a: 42–3 [²-k-l]) and draws the image of a dead animal lying defenseless against a predator – *al-sab' al-ḍarīm*, as one poet calls the predator – that feasts on the carcass at leisure. One who is backbitten is, likewise, at the mercy of the backbiter, who “nibbles” at the victim’s reputation without fear of being challenged. The Arabs called backbiting a dastardly act; in the Qur'ān, a religious value is added to the act. Q 49:12, providing an example of backbiting, says: *a-yuḥibbu aḥadukum an ya'kula laḥma akhīhi maytan fakarihtumūh*, “Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would abhor it!” The word *akh*, “brother,” in the verse means “brother in religion,” as borne out generally by the context and specifically by the declaration in verse 10 of the same *sūra*, “The believers are but brothers to one another” (*innama 'l-mu'minūna ikhwa*). The addition of a single word transforms the familiar Arab image of backbiting in that the act now conjures up not merely the picture of an animal devouring a dead animal, but the picture of a human being devouring the flesh of a dead human being – or, rather, of a brother devouring the flesh of a dead brother. The verse is saying: carrion-eating is repugnant, cannibalism is worse, and acting like a cannibal brother is the ultimate in heinousness.

Another instance of the strategic use of the word *akh* is found in Q 2:178, which, laying down the law of *qiṣāṣ*, or retaliation, says that the punishment for taking a human life is death. According to the verse, the killer’s life may be spared if the heirs of the person killed accept blood money. This dispensation is introduced with the words, *fa-man 'uḥfiya lahū min akhīhi shay'* (“But if one is pardoned something by his brother”). The use of the word *akh* here makes a subtle but strong appeal, namely, that the option of blood money be considered by the heirs, for, in the end, Muslims are brothers to one another, and – the verse is suggesting – acceptance of blood money might mitigate the rancor and hostility between the aggressor party and the aggrieved party, eventually leading to reconciliation between the two (Iṣlāḥī 2000: I, 432). In pre-Islamic times, acceptance of blood money by a tribe was considered a sign of weakness – “accepting milk [that is, milch camels as blood money] in exchange for blood” was the contemptuous expression used on such occasions (see, for example, al-Marzūqī 1951–3: I, 216, verse 2). The Qur'ān, rejecting the vendetta motif and allowing for the possibility of reconciliation between two estranged parties, not only allows the taking of blood money, but, by using the word *akh*, casts its vote in favor of blood money, thus wiping out the feeling of disgrace attached to acceptance of blood money.

We will take one more example of the Qur'ān’s infusion of religious and moral meaning into the Arabic language. *Taraktuhū kadhā*, “I left him in such-and-such a state,” was a common Arabic expression, often used by poets in a context of war, the poet-warrior boasting

that he felled his opponent and left his corpse unattended in the battlefield. A representative use of the construction is found in the *mu‘allaqa* of ‘Antara (al-Tibrīzī 1964: 239):

Fa-taraktuhū jazara ʿl-sibā‘i yanushnahū
Mā bayna qullati raʿsihī waʿl-miʿsamī
 (I left him there, butchered meat for predators, which devoured him
 From the top of his head to his wrists.)

In Q 54:15, the verbal form of the phrase *tarakahū kadhā* is retained, but the context undergoes a change. The verse, referring to the event of the rescue of Noah and the drowning of his opponents, says: *wa-laqaḍ taraknāhā āyatan fa-hal min muddakir* (“And We left it [the land, or story, of Noah] to serve as a sign, so, are there any who would take remembrance?”). The first audience of the Qurʾān, on hearing this apparently simple statement, must have made a mental comparison between the Qurʾānic and pre-Islamic Arabic uses of *tarakahū kadhā*. ‘Antara’s use of the phrase, it is not difficult to see, is devoid of the moral dimension of history encapsulated in the Qurʾānic verse.

Above and beyond the individual terms, phrases, and passages that may be cited to illustrate the Qurʾānic valorization of the Arabic language is the “climate” of Qurʾānic language. Even a cursory reading of the Qurʾān, whether in the original or in translation, will bring out the religious character of Qurʾānic language. In all but six of the 114 *sūras*, God is referred to either as *Allāh*, *Rabb*, or *Raḥmān* or by means of a pronoun for God. But even in those six *sūras* – all of them short (Q 101, 102, 103, 107, 109, and 111) – God is clearly in the background. And it is not simply a question of referring to God. In the Qurʾān, God is mentioned as the central point of reference for all existence and the central point of validation for all activity. The mention of God or reference to him thus serves to give a distinctive sacral character to Qurʾānic language.

Orality

The language of the Qurʾān is oral, but the nature of Qurʾānic orality should be understood clearly. The Qurʾān was presented by Muḥammad in an oral situation, but this does not mean that the Qurʾānic speech is colloquial. The Qurʾān does not say or imply that its language is one of the dialects spoken in a certain town or region of Arabia – Mecca, Ṭāʾif, Medina, or some other – but simply that it has been revealed *bi-lisān ʿarabī mubīn*, as was noted above. The adjective *mubīn* in this phrase connotes “standard.” Of the sixteen verses that were cited earlier in discussing the word *mubīn*, some belong to Meccan and others to Medinan *sūras*. This means that the Qurʾānic claim to be *mubīn* was made both in Mecca and in Medina, and there is no indication in the Qurʾān or in other sources that the claim was challenged at any time during the period of revelation, in Mecca or in Medina. This fact in itself supports the view that, at the time of Muḥammad, a standard version of Arabic existed and was well established, at least in the Ḥijāz and possibly in all of Arabia, and that Qurʾānic language represented that version. We will note two characteristics of Qurʾānic orality.

Saj'

The usual translation of this word, “rhymed prose,” while not entirely incorrect, places Qur’ānic language in the category of prose, denoting, additionally, that that language happens to be rhymed. This description runs the risk of compromising the rhythmic quality of Qur’ānic language. The language of the Qur’ān partakes of both poetry and prose and is certainly more poetic in some parts and more prose-like in others, but it is difficult to generalize and say that it is primarily prose or poetry. Perhaps the best way to describe it is to say that it is *sui generis*. Because of its rhythmic quality, Qur’ānic language is eminently chantable. Rhyme, while found throughout the Qur’ān, is conspicuous in many of the early or middle Meccan *sūras*, in which the relatively short verses throw the rhyming words into prominence. The following passage (Q 81:1–14), which draws, in almost epic dimensions, a picture of the world coming to an end, comes very close to being poetry (the rhyming syllables are given in bold):

idhā ʾl-shamsu kuww**irat**
wa-idhā ʾl-nujūmu n-kad**arat**
wa-idhā ʾl-jibālu suy**yirat**
wa-idhā ʾl-ʾishāru ʾuṭ**tilat**
wa-idhā ʾl-wuḥūshu ḥush**irat**
wa-idhā ʾl-biḥāru suj**jirat**
wa-idhā ʾl-nufūsu zuww**wijāt**
wa-idhā ʾl-mawʾudatu suʾ**ilat**
bi-ayyi dhanbin qut**ilat**
wa-idhā ʾl-ṣuḥufu nush**irat**
wa-idhā ʾl-samaʾu kush**itāt**
wa-idhā ʾl-jahīmu suʾ**irat**
wa-idhā ʾl-jannatu uz**lifāt**
ʾalimat naḥsun mā aḥ**darāt**

A change of rhyme in a *sūra* usually signals a change in the subject. For example, in *sūra* 81, from which the above lines have been quoted, a few oaths are sworn next, in verses 15–19, which have a different rhyme. (For another example of the change of rhyme indicating a change of subject, see Q 79:1–5 (*gharqā, nashṭā, sabḥā, sabqā, amrā*), 6–14 (*rājifa, wājifa, khāshīʾa, ḥāfirā, nakhira* [partial rhyme], *khāsira, wahīdā, sāhira*), 15–26 (*Mūsā, Ṭuwā, ṭaghā, tazakkā, fa-takhshā, al-kubrā, ʾaṣā, yasʾā, fa-nādā, al-aʾlā, al-ūlā, yakhshā*)). Similarly, in *sūra* 96, the change of rhyme from one set of verses to another (1–2, 3–5, 6–14, 15–18) marks a change of subject, the only exception being the last verse, which stands alone – presumably because it draws a prescriptive conclusion to the *sūra*’s argument. Often, rhyme in the Qur’ān is mixed with assonance.

The Qur’ānic use of rhyme and assonance sets the Islamic scripture apart from soothsayer utterances (cf. Watt and Bell 1970: 77–9). In the Qur’ān, rhyme and assonance are ancillary to the content of the scripture, whereas in the Arab soothsayers’ speech they bear no necessary connection with the content of the soothsaying – not to mention that Arab soothsaying lacked the ethical orientation of the Qur’ān.

Iltifāt

This term refers to shifts of person, number, and tense in a discourse (Abdel Haleem 2000: 184–210; Robinson 1996: 245–52). Such shifts, quite frequent in the Qurʾānic text, are a significant marker of orality. Like a speaker addressing a live audience, the Qurʾān may begin by speaking to one segment of the audience – say, the believers – and then, with little advance notice, may turn its attention to another segment – the disbelievers, for example. We also have to imagine that the speaker – the Qurʾān in this case – cognizant of the dynamic oral situation, responds to questions asked by some members of the audience, answers objections made by others, and comments on issues that, even though not verbally raised by any member of the audience, may be present in the audience’s minds and, thus, be part of the overall situation. An example of *iltifāt* of person is Q 2:74–5, in which the People of the Book and, immediately afterwards, Muslims are addressed. An example of *iltifāt* of number is the opening words of *sūra* 65: “O prophet, when you divorce [*tallaqtum*] your wives.” Instead of the expected singular *ṭallaqta*, the Qurʾān uses the plural form *ṭallaqtum* and continues to use the plural verb form until verse 6, implying that the prophet is being addressed as a representative of the Muslim community and that the injunction applies not only to him but to all of his followers as well. A simple shift of number thus widens the scope of application of the injunction. Finally, Q 2:214 is an example of *iltifāt* of tense:

Do you think that you will enter heaven even though you have not yet experienced the like of what those who lived before you experienced? They suffered from hunger and distress, and they were shaken up, until the prophet and those with him say, “When will God’s help come?” Lo, God’s help is on hand!

The reference to previous nations is made by means of the perfect tense, except in the phrase “until the prophet and those with him say,” the verb “say” being imperfect in the original (*yaqūla*) when one would expect it to be in the perfect (*qāla*). The strategic use of the imperfect links up the past ages with the present: it establishes an identity between the ordeals of the previous prophets and their followers on the one hand and that of Muḥammad and his followers on the other. The net effect of the identification is to console Muḥammad and his companions, who are being assured that God will help them just as he helped earlier prophets in similar situations.

A proper appreciation of *iltifāt* in the Qurʾān will yield a more satisfactory explanation of some of its verses. Consider Q 6:52:

And do not spurn those who call upon their Lord day and night, seeking His face [that is, pleasure]; you do not share any of their responsibility, and they do not share any of your responsibility – lest you should spurn them and thereby become a wrongdoer.

Many commentators think that all the third-person plural pronouns in the verse refer to the believers, the verse commanding the prophet to be kind to them (see, for example, al-Qurṭubī 1967: VI, 432). On this understanding, the verse would be saying: Muḥammad, do not spurn the believers, who call upon God day and night. But there is

one problem: the middle part of the verse, “you do not share any of their responsibility, and they do not share any of your responsibility,” is a strong statement – it is particularly strong in Arabic (*mā ‘alayka min ḥisābihim min shay’ in wa-mā min ḥisābika ‘alayhim min shay’*) – and its curt tone, no less than its words, is unlikely to be used of the believers, the disbelievers being the only possible referent. If so, then it would make sense to regard the disbelievers as the antecedent of the pronouns in *min ḥisābihim* and *‘alayhim*, but the believers as the antecedent of the pronoun in *fa-taṭrudahum*. The meaning of the verse now will be: Muḥammad, do not, in the interest of converting the disbelievers, ignore or spurn those who have already believed, for the disbelievers, if they persist in their disbelief, will have their own answering to do, just as you will have your own answering to do, neither of you being responsible for the beliefs or actions of the other; you must not, therefore, spurn the believers, for, doing so will make you a wrongdoer (see Iṣlāḥī 2000: III, 59). This interpretation itself is subject to an objection. If the plural pronouns in the verse have more than one antecedent – the disbelievers in the case of two pronouns and the believers in the case of one – then why does the Qur’ān itself not make that distinction so as to avoid all confusion? Here, the point made above about Qur’ānic orality should be recalled: a speaker addressing a live audience can point to two different sections of the audience and use the pronoun “you” to speak to each, without causing any confusion. The situation in Q 6:52 is similar. The Qur’ān, addressing the prophet, who has to be imagined as facing an audience composed of both believers and disbelievers, points first to the believers and says, “these people over here,” then to the disbelievers and says, “these people over here,” and, finally, again to the believers and says, “these people over here.” In a scenario like this, the use of the same pronoun for two – or even more – groups of people would create no confusion as long as the non-verbal components of the situation exist to identify the addressee in each case.

Genres

Several genres of Qur’ānic discourse may be distinguished – narrative, poetic, hortatory, hymnal, and legal. The narrative genre is conspicuous in *sūras* that relate historical events – for example, *sūras* 11, 21, and 23, which contain accounts of previous nations’ response to the Divine message and describe their fate, and the fairly long *sūra* 12 (111 verses), devoted to the story of Joseph. However, on very few occasions does one find in the Qur’ān sustained narration. As a rule, in a given place, only a certain portion of a story – the portion bearing on the subject under discussion – is given, other portions being related in other contexts. Furthermore, Qur’ānic narration is selective in that it presents only those elements of a story that are significant from the viewpoint of illustrating a certain moral. For the same reasons, Qur’ānic characters are not drawn in detail. These characters appear to be types, though a close study will show that most of them also have peculiar or distinctive traits. Often, the onset of a story is marked by a word or expression like *idh* or *wa-idh* (“when” or “and when”) or *udhkur* (“remember!”), as in Q 2:49–64, in which *wa-idh* is used no fewer than ten times, and in *sūra* 19, in which the stories of Mary, Abraham, Moses, Ishmael, and Idrīs are each introduced

with *wa-dhkur* (verses 16, 41, 51, 54, 56). Narrative in the Qurʾān often includes dialogue, of which there is considerable variety (Mir 1992).

It is often remarked that the Qurʾān is poetic without being poetry. We have already mentioned an important element in the Qurʾān's poetical repertoire, namely, *sajʿ*, especially when it occurs in the crisply short verses of early and middle Meccan *sūras* (e.g., Q 55; 78; 91; 92; 93; 99; 100). Another is the balanced phrasal construction, as in Q 88:13–16, each of its four verses consisting of a noun and a qualifying adjective in identical syntactic positions:

Fīhā sururun marfūʿa
wa-akwābun mawḍūʿa
wa-namāriqu maṣfūfa
wa-zarābiyyu mabthūtha
 (In it [paradise], there are couches raised high,
 and cups set out,
 and carpets aligned,
 and cushions lying all around.)

Verses 17–20 of the same *sūra* provide another example of such construction.

In a broad sense, the entire Qurʾān can be called a hortatory text in that it seeks to persuade its addressees to lead their lives in accordance with a certain set of dictates. But many specific passages and verses aim – through command, admonition, or parable – to cultivate in the believers the right attitude toward God, life, and humanity and the right precepts of conduct in various spheres of life. Examples are 2:208–9, 261–71; 3:102–5; 4:29–32, 58–9; 5:8; 8:20–9; 24:21–33; 49:1–13; 63:9–10).

Only a small number of texts in the Qurʾān can be called hymns if a hymn is defined as a song in praise of a deity. But the Qurʾān is not entirely without hymnal elements. Consider Q 22:18:

Have you not seen that God is one to whom bow down all who are in the heavens and the earth and the sun, the moon, and the stars, and the mountains, the trees, and animals, and many of the people. And there are many who have become deserving of punishment. And the one whom God humiliates will find no one to honor him. Indeed, God does what He wills.

Two other examples are Q 24:41–4 and 30:20–7.

Qurʾānic legalese – if the expression be allowed – is notable for its matter-of-factness, and also for a degree of complexity that arises from a statement of law that covers exceptions, dispensations, and contingent circumstances. Thus, Q 2:282–3 (1) commands the believers to record in writing a loan transaction made for a stated period of time; (2) instructs the scribe to record the transaction faithfully and the debtor – or, in some cases, his representative – to dictate the terms of the transaction; (3) specifies the number and qualifications of witnesses; (4) admonishes the witnesses to discharge their obligation willingly and diligently; (5) stresses the importance of recording the transaction in writing, but validates verbal agreement when “ready

merchandise” is involved; (6) emphasizes the need to take witnesses and ensure the safety of both scribe and witness; and (7) allows the taking of pledges by creditors in case loan transactions have to be made during travel. Q 4:12, which lays down rules for the distribution of a person’s property among the heirs, is the basis of the Islamic law of inheritance. Qur’ānic legal language reflects the ethical vision that informs the Qur’ānic legislative material. Thus, statements of laws are frequently accompanied by exhortations to cultivate piety and to remember that the law is being given by an all-knowing, all-wise deity. The legal passages in the Qur’ān may contain maxim-like statements. For example, Q 4:178 lays down the law of *qiṣāṣ* (retribution), and the next verse says, “And in [the law of] *qiṣāṣ*, there is life for you, O people of wisdom, that you may acquire piety!”

It remains to add that the various genres of the Qur’ānic text do not occur discretely, but rather interpenetrate – especially in longer Medinan *sūras* – thus giving rise to a distinctive Qur’ānic discourse.

Verbal Economy

The saying “The best speech is that which is brief and yet effectively conveys the meaning” (*khayru ’l-kalāmi mā qalla wa dalla*) is often cited as the motto of Classical Arabic rhetoric (*balāgha*). As a rule, the principle of economy of expression, enshrined in this saying, is adhered to in the Qur’ān. The two main forms taken by the principle, terseness and ellipsis, are abundantly attested in the Qur’ān.

Terseness

Compactness frequently marks not only individual sentences but also passages and extended descriptions in the Qur’ān. Sometimes the essential details of a story are presented briefly; sometimes, different types of statements – for example, commands and prohibitions or promises and threats – are combined; and sometimes aspects of Qur’ānic doctrine, philosophy, or worldview are summed up with proverbial force. Q 29:14–15 summarizes the story of Noah and his people:

We sent Noah to his people, and he stayed among them for a thousand years save fifty. Then a typhoon overtook them – wrongdoers as they were. And We rescued him and the people of the boat, and We made the event a sign for the people of the world.

Q 11:44 describes how the floodwaters that drowned Noah’s people were made to recede by God:

It was said, “Earth, swallow up your water! Skies, stop!” The water shrank; the matter was decided; and it [the Ark] sat perched atop [Mt.] Jūdī. And it was said, “Away with the wrongdoers!”

Q 2:251, referring to the Israelites' victory over the Philistines, speaks of David as the hero of the battle and as the recipient of special wisdom from God. The verse also lays down a law of history:

They defeated them by God's will. David killed Goliath, and God gave him kingship and wisdom, teaching him whatever He pleases. And if God were not to repulse one people by means of another, the earth would be filled with corruption. God, however, is bountiful toward the world.

Q 29:40, summing up the accounts of destruction of earlier nations, describes the inexorable application of the Divine law to nations, the forms of punishment meted out in the past (described in detail in other places of the Qur'ān), and the principle underlying the punishment:

Each one of them [nations] We seized on account of its sins: there were some whom We caused to slide into the land; there were some who were overtaken by a crashing thunder; and there were some whom We caused to drown. God was not the one to wrong them. Rather, they had wronged themselves.

Ellipsis

In its simple form, ellipsis involves suppression of a word or phrase in a statement. Joseph's half-brothers, trying to convince their father, Jacob, that his son, Joseph's real brother, had been held back in Egypt through no fault of theirs, say: "And ask the town we were in" (Q 12:82). By "the town" they mean "the people of the town," the word *ahl* in the Arabic phrase *ahl al-qarya* having been omitted (al-Qurṭubī 1967: IX, 246). The omission is justified because it does not detract from clarity.

At a slightly higher, and more technical, level, a correlative term or an antithetical unit is suppressed, the context pointing to the suppression. Q 6:13 says: "To Him belong what remains still during the night and [moves during] the day." Here, the words in brackets are omitted and are to be taken as understood (Iṣlāḥī 2000: III, 6). Q 27:86 is similar: "Have they not observed that We have made the night so that they might take rest in it, and the day an illuminator [that they might seek God's bounty during it]?" Again, the words in brackets are taken as understood, as suggested by other Qur'ānic verses – for example, Q 28:73, which says: "It is a manifestation of His mercy that He has made for you night and day, that you might take rest in it and seek His bounty." Taking rest goes with the night, seeking God's bounty (i.e., engaging in economic activity) with the day (Iṣlāḥī 2000: V, 703).

Sometimes one or more links in a chain of thought or one or more steps in an argument are omitted, the readers or listeners being expected to supply the missing steps or links from their knowledge of other relevant parts of the scriptural text. To take an example, Q 43:54 says that Pharaoh "made light of his people and so they obeyed him." The complete argument is as follows:

- A Pharaoh made light of his people
- B *his people let themselves be taken lightly*
- C *he gave them orders*
- D they obeyed him

B and C, that is to say, are implied.

Parataxis

Being in the style of Classical Arabic, the Qur'ānic text makes sparing use of transitional expressions, which spell out the causal relationships between clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. The technical term for the resulting coordinate construction, which the Qur'ān prefers over the subordinate construction, is parataxis (*irdāf*). Sometimes parataxis is easy to notice, as in Q 7:31, *kulū wa-shrabū wa-lā tuṣrifū*, in which the first *wāw* means “and,” but the second, an adversative, means “but,” the translation being: “Eat and drink, but do not be extravagant.” Other cases may be a little more complex. Consider Q 2:34, which says, referring to Satan, *abā wa-stakbara wa-kāna mina' l-kāfirīn* (“He refused [to bow to Adam] and he became proud and he was [or became] one of the disbelievers”). Let us look at the first two of the three clauses. It is possible that Satan heedlessly refused to obey the injunction to bow to Adam, so that it was only *after* he had done so that he became proud of his act, his pride validating his act in his own eyes. But it is also possible that his refusal constituted a studied, rather than hasty, act on his part, stemming from an already strong sense of pride, so that he refused to bow to Adam *because* he was proud (the Arabic *wa-stakbara* in this case could be taken as a parenthetical conditional clause (= *wa-qadi stakbara*)). Now let us look at the last two verbs in the original. It is possible that Satan acted arrogantly and, *as a result*, became a disbeliever. But the Arabic verb *kāna* can mean “to be” as well as “to become.” As such, it is possible that Satan always was a disbeliever and his disbelief was the cause rather than the result of his arrogance. A close study of Qur'ānic parataxis can reveal complexities hidden behind seemingly simple constructions.

On another level, parataxis raises the issue of coherence in the Qur'ānic discourse. The first twenty-nine verses of *sūra* 2 distinguish between those who believe in the message sent down to Muḥammad and those who disbelieve in it. The next ten verses (30–9) narrate incidents from the story of Adam and Eve. The beginning of the passage – *wa-idh qāla rabbuka li'l-malā'ikati innī jā'ilun fī 'l-arḍi khalīfa* (“And when your Lord said to the angels, ‘I am going to install a caliph on earth’”) – seems to introduce a new subject altogether, making one wonder about the connection of this passage with the preceding verses. In cases like these, it helps to remember that, as a rule, the Qur'ān tells a story to illustrate a theme already under discussion. Accordingly, when one comes upon a story in the Qur'ān and wonders about its relevance in a particular place, one would do well to reread the story in light of the subject that has led up to that point. Q 2:30–9, upon close reading, will be found to have a bearing on the two different types of responses – they may be called angelic and satanic – to the prophetic message outlined

in the preceding verses: an arrogant Satan disobeys the Divine command to bow down to Adam, whereas the angels, after they have received from God a satisfactory answer to their query about the need to create the human species, obey God and bow down before Adam. The story of Adam, thus, corresponds with the first twenty-nine verses of the *sūra* (Iṣlāḥī 2000: I, 152–4). Similarly, Q 6:74–90 relates a certain incident from Abraham’s life and then makes brief references to a number of other prophets – Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron among them. No transitional expressions exist to link up this passage with the preceding part of the *sūra*. But the passage presents a refutation of idol worship, which is a prominent theme of much of the *sūra* from the beginning up to this point (for example, verses 14–24 and 56–64). *Sūra* 6 tells the people of Mecca that their idolatry belies their claim to be the heirs of Abraham the monotheist, and it is in this context that verses 74–90 occur (Iṣlāḥī 2000: III, 84).

Repetition

The Qur’ān does not share the view that repetition is necessarily a demerit. There is considerable repetition in the Qur’ān – of both theme and expression – as one would expect from a book that calls itself *dhikr* (“remembrance, reminder”) and is preoccupied with the task of explicating its message to doubters and objectors no less than to believers and submitters. From a Qur’ānic standpoint, the only relevant question is whether repetition serves a purpose, and there is sufficient reason to believe that repetition in the Qur’ān is purposeful.

Apart from putting more than ordinary emphasis on a statement, repetition may bring into sharp relief a certain doctrine of the religion. For example, Q 5:110 enumerates some of the miracles of Jesus, the addition of *bi-idhnī* (“by My [i.e., God’s] will”) in each case ensuring that God is understood as the source of all miracles and Jesus only as an instrument for performing them: “and when you [Jesus] created from clay a shape like that of a bird by My will and breathed into it, and it became a bird by My will; and you healed the blind and the leper by My will; and when you raised people from the dead by My will” (cf. Q 3:49, in which Jesus repeats the phrase “by God’s will” with the same signification). In some cases, repetition is scarcely noticeable in that the repeated words, being short and simple, are quickly processed in the mind as they occur, deflecting attention away from themselves and to the main argument. This happens in Q 7:195, in which four questions, the first introduced by *a-lahum* (“Do they have...?”) and the last three by the correlative *am-lahum* (“Or do they have...?”), are asked in quick succession, followed by a challenge that represents a climactic moment:

Do they have feet they walk with?

Or do they have hands they hold with?

Or do they have eyes they see with?

Or do they have ears they hear with?

Say: “Call those whom you associate [with God], then play your tricks against me, and give me no respite!”

Q 7:195 is an instance of repetition turning attention away from itself and thus becoming practically unnoticeable (two other examples are Q 27:60–4, in which *am man* ["Or who is the one who...?"] occurs five times, and Q 36:33–41, in which *wa-āyatun lahum* ["And a sign for them is..."] occurs thrice [Q 30:20–5 is similar to the latter example]). In other cases, the exact opposite result may be produced by repetition, which may consist not of a short or simple expression but of a substantial phrase whose syntactic position requires the reader to linger with it, paying it close attention. In *sūra* 54, for example, repetition takes the form of an ominous-sounding refrain, namely, the pointed question *fa-hal min muddakir* ("So, are there any who would take remembrance?"), which occurs six times (verses 15, 17, 22, 32, 40, 51), immediately preceded four times by *wa-laqaḍ yassarnā 'l-Qur'āna li 'l-dhikr* ("And we have certainly made the Qur'ān easy for purposes of remembrance"). Each of the six instances of *fa-hal min muddakir* concludes a verse, carrying the burden of part of the argument and, at the same time, contributing to the argument being made in the larger passage.

Sometimes repetition draws attention to an important theme of the whole *sūra*, as in *sūra* 26, in which the refrain-like statement, *inna fī dhālika la-āyatan wa-mā kāna aktharuhum mu'minīn* ("In this, certainly, there is a sign, but most of them are not believers"), occurs eight times (verses 8, 67, 103, 121, 139, 158, 174, 190), indicating, and bearing a direct relationship to, a principal theme of the *sūra*. Q 26:105–90 tells the stories of five prophets – Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot, and Shu'ayb – and their nations. The five parts into which the long passage may be divided (105–22, 123–40, 141–59, 160–75, 176–90) have almost identical beginnings (for example, "The people of Noah gave the lie to the messengers" and "The 'Ād [Hūd's nation] gave the lie to the messengers") and the same ending ("And, indeed, your Lord alone is the One Mighty, Merciful"), and have several other features in common.

The verbal and conceptual repetition in the above-cited passages underscores several points, namely, that all prophets before Muḥammad taught the same essential message; that all prophets invited their nations to ground their conduct in sound belief; that Muḥammad should not lose heart over the stubborn opposition he is facing, for prophets before Muḥammad, too, were rejected by their nations; and that Muḥammad's opponents, if they do not mend their ways, will be dealt with by God in the same way as previous rebel nations were. In *sūra* 16, the construction *inna fī dhālika la-āya li-qawmin yatafakkarūn* ("In this, indeed, there is a sign for people who would reflect") occurs in verse 11. The construction is repeated almost verbatim six times, with a variation made in a few cases on the verb concluding each verse: *ya'qilūn* ("who use reason" [verse 12]); *yadhhdhakkarūn* ("who take remembrance" [verse 13]); *yasma'ūn* ("who listen" [verse 65]); *ya'qilūn* (verse 67); *yatafakkarūn* (verse 69); *yu'minūn* ("who believe" [verse 79]). The use of different verbs stresses the need to give full consideration to the claims of the prophetic message.

Imagery

Like pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, the Qur'ān is rich in imagery. A reader of the ancient Arabic odes will be struck by their well-drawn images of the elements of nature, of heroic action on the battlefield, of the camel speeding along with its rider through the

trackless desert, of the precious wine brought in from distant lands, and of the wistful lover passing, years later, through the ruins of the dwellings where he once lived and dallied with his beloved. But this imagery, though delightfully vivid, is self-referential in the sense that it does not provide any significant leads to philosophical or moral reflection. Qur'ānic imagery, on the other hand, adds to its graphic quality a clear focus of thought and is, in the end, instrumental in the sense that it reinforces the structures of Qur'ānic thought. (In this respect, the imagery of the Qur'ān invites comparison with that of the Bible.) We can discuss Qur'ānic imagery under three heads.

Simile (Watt and Bell 1970: 81–2)

Many Qur'ānic similes pertain to the “Last Day,” a key notion in the Qur'ān. To the Arabs, mountains symbolized permanence, *khawālid* (“eternal ones”) being one of the words they used to describe them. When the Qur'ān related the cataclysmic happenings of the Last Day, many sarcastically asked: “What about the mountains – will they, too, perish?” The Qur'ān replied that the mountains, on that day, would lose their integrity, floating around “like clouds” (Q 27:88). Q 55:37 says that, on the Last Day, the sky will split up, “turning red like [freshly peeled] skin,” its blue changed to red. Called out to gather at a certain place on that day, human beings will, obeying the command, come running “as if they were rushing to appointed marks” (Q 70:43; in modern terms, as if they were eager to reach the finishing line or – not to make it sound too modern – to score a goal).

A few miscellaneous similes, each firmly tied to some aspect of the Qur'ānic religious teaching, may be noted. Q 74:50–1 says that the disbelievers shy away from the Divine message “as if they were frightened asses running away from a lion.” The crescent moon, obeying the law God has laid down for it, passes through many phases and, after becoming a full moon, begins to diminish until it comes to look “like an old twig” (Q 36:39). Q 7:171, referring to a pact that Israel had made with God, speaks of God's act of causing the mountain to hang over the Israelites' heads “as if it were a canopy.” And in a simile that would seem exotic today but must have seemed entirely appropriate to seventh-century Arabs, the houris of paradise are compared to “hidden eggs” (Q 37:49), a reference to ostrich eggs, which the male of the species jealously guards, hiding them from predators, until they are hatched. The maiden egg was considered especially lovely because of its creamy yellow color, and poets frequently compared a pretty woman's complexion to it. The simile, thus, describes the houris as chaste, delicate, well-taken-care-of, and beautiful. A notable feature of Qur'ānic similes is the likening of the abstract to the concrete (Quṭb 1982: 39). A good example is Q 14:18, which says that, on the Last Day, the disbelievers' supposedly good actions will be of no avail to them, those actions becoming “like ashes that a strong wind sweeps about on a stormy day.”

Metaphor (Watt and Bell 1970: 82)

The metaphors of the Qur'ān, like its similes, occur in a well-defined religious context. Q 3:7, dividing the Qur'ānic verses into “firm” or “unmistakable” and “ambiguous,”

calls the former “the mother of the book” (*umm al-kitāb*). The word *umm* (literally, “mother”) suggests that the “firm” verses are of foundational importance and furnish criteria for settling differences and judging matters, the metaphor assigning to such verses hermeneutic value (Iṣlāhī 2000: II, 25).

The Arabs engaged in trade and commerce (Mecca reaped the benefits of transit trade, while agriculture dominated Medinan economic life), and several metaphors relate to that background. Q 2:141 speaks of the actions performed by humans in this world as earnings, for one “earns” paradise or hell in the next world on the basis of one’s conduct in this world. In Q 9:111, we read that God has “bought” from the believers their lives and wealth in exchange for the promise that they shall have paradise in the next world. To spend one’s wealth in the way of God, especially in a war, is called advancing a “good loan” to God, who will repay it manifold (Q 2:245; 57:11). The hypocrites of Medina are criticized in these words (Q 2:16): “They are the ones who bought misguidance in exchange for guidance [i.e., preferred misguidance to guidance], and so their transaction yielded no profit.” Q 35:29 says that those who read the book of God, regularly offer the prayer, and generously spend of the gift of wealth they have received from God can rightfully expect to have made a profitable transaction. Q 61:10–12 makes the prophet say:

O those who have believed, shall I tell you of a transaction that will deliver you from a painful punishment: that you believe in God and His messenger, and fight in the way of God with your wealth and your souls. This is better for you if you knew; and He will forgive you your sins and make you enter gardens with streams flowing underneath and good dwellings in gardens of eternity. This is the great success!

Parable (Watt and Bell 1970: 81)

The Qur’ānic parables (or similitudes – I will use the two words interchangeably), too, add point and color to the Qur’ānic argument or statement. Unlike a simile or a metaphor, a parable cannot be analyzed in such a way as to establish a one-to-one correspondence between the persons, situations, or objects compared, the focus of attention being the main point the parable as a whole seek to make. On the other hand, by virtue of its relative length, the parable has greater potential than a simile or metaphor to develop a thought. The central theme of the Qur’ān is monotheism. In Q 14:24–6, the monotheistic creed is called the “good word” (*kalima ṭayyiba*), and is contrasted with idolatry, which is called the “evil word” (*kalima khabītha*):

Have you not seen how God has struck a similitude – that of a good word? It is like a good tree whose root is entrenched [in the earth] and whose branches are up in the heavens; it yields its fruit every time, by the command of its Lord. And God strikes similitudes for people that they might take remembrance. And the similitude of an evil word is that of an evil tree that has been uprooted from above the earth, lacking as it does all stability.

The parable can be interpreted to mean that belief in monotheism has a solid basis in nature and reason and is productive of good conduct, whereas idolatry has no firm

basis, neither in reason nor in nature, and is therefore false (Iṣlāḥī 2000: IV, 14–17). Q 24:39, using two parables, brings into relief the Qurʾānic theme that faith and works are integrally related:

As for those who have disbelieved, their actions are like a mirage in a plain which a thirsty man takes to be water, until, when he gets to it, he finds it to be nothing, and finds by it God, Who will settle his account fully; and God is quick of recompense. Or they [actions] are like layers of darkness in a deep ocean, a wave covering it, on top of which is another wave, on top of which are clouds – one layer of darkness atop another: when he puts out his hand he can scarcely see it; and he whom God grants no light has no light.

One of the best-known verses of the Qurʾān is Q 24:35. It makes the point that God is the source of all knowledge and understanding, and it does so by presenting a similitude of surpassing literary beauty:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth! His light, in terms of a similitude, is like a niche in which there is a lamp – the lamp is in a glass, the glass as if it were a brilliant star – that is being kindled by [the oil of] a blessed olive tree that is neither [of the] eastern nor [of the] western [side]: its oil would all but light up, even though no fire had touched it. Light upon light! God guides to His light whomever He likes.

The Qurʾān also uses parable as a vehicle of social comment. In several parables, the Quraysh, the oligarchs of Mecca, who were opposed to Muḥammad, are criticized for their reluctance to share their wealth with the poor members of society. In Q 68:17–33, for example, the Quraysh are compared to the owners of an orchard who had forgotten that they owed their affluence to God and, in their arrogance, neglected the poor of their community.

We have put them [Quraysh] to the test, just as We put the people of the garden to the test, when they swore an oath that they would definitely pick the [fruit of the] garden early in the morning – and they were making no exceptions! But there came upon it [garden] a calamity from your Lord as they slept, and it became like a field mowed down. In the morning, they called out to one another: “Get to your fields early if you do intend to pick.” And so they set out, whispering to one another: “No poor man must accost you today.” And they set out early, in earnestness, and in full control [of the situation]! But when they saw it [garden], they said, “We have lost our way! No, we have been deprived!” The most reasonable man among them said, “Did I not tell you? Why do you not glorify God?” They said, “Glory to our Lord! We were the wrongdoers.” Then they started to blame one another. They said, “Woe to us, it is we who are the transgressors. Perhaps our Lord will give us something better in its place; we turn to our Lord.” This is how the punishment is! And the punishment of the hereafter is severer. Only if they knew!

The meaning of the parable is clear: the wealth given by God to people in this world is meant to test them, and failure in the test will result in the loss of that wealth in this life and in a harsher punishment in the next. The particular point of the parable is that the

Quraysh, like the men of the orchard, have monopolized Mecca's sources of income, denying the needy any share of their prosperity, thus failing in their moral obligation to look after the welfare of the community as a whole. For this failure, they are warned of dire consequences in this world and the next. They are also told that, after a certain time, repentance will be of no avail.

Concluding Remarks

A more exhaustive study than the present one will examine many other features of Qur'ānic language. To mention a few such features: (1) Certain *sūras* – for instance, Q 2–7, and 10–15 – open with the so-called “broken letters,” for which no completely satisfactory explanation exists. That the letters posed no special problems to the Qur'ān's first audience suggests that the use of such letters at the beginning of orations – perhaps with the purpose of drawing and focusing the audience's attention – was familiar to the Arabs. There may be some connection of theme and content between two or more *sūras* sharing one or more of the broken letters (Iṣlāḥī 2000: I, 82–4). (2) The Qur'ānic oaths, often regarded as rhetorical flourishes, have been cogently explained by the Indian scholar Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī (d. 1938) as well-constructed arguments (Mir 1989b). (3) The relationship between sound and sense in the Qur'ān (Sells 1993) constitutes a subject that deserves more attention than it has received. (4) Q 3:54, “And they used a secret stratagem and God used a secret stratagem” (*wa-makarū wa-makara 'llāh*), represents a category of verses that have caused theological worries – for, how can wiliness be attributed to God? But such verses can be explained as instances of *mushākala* (formal equivalence), a stylistic feature in which identity of form does not necessarily imply identity of content. For example, the repetition of the verb *makara* in Q 3:54, this time with God as its subject, only signifies that God “paid them in the same coin,” thus thwarting their evil attempts. In the same way, Q 2:190, *fa-mani 'tada 'alaykum fa 'tadū 'alayhi bi-mithli mā 'tadā 'alaykum* (literally, “So, anyone who transgresses against you, you may transgress against them the way they have transgressed against you”) only means that one has the right to respond to aggression and not necessarily that one has the license to become an aggressor oneself, for the same verse states unambiguously that “God does not love those who commit transgression.”

A linguistic feature like *mushākala* highlights the need to emphasize the distinction between language and logic. The language of the Qur'ān must not be parsed, analyzed, and discussed as if it were a treatise of logic. A proper understanding of that language requires that it be seen as belonging to the living context which gave rise to it; we saw, for example, how, viewed as part of a dynamic oral situation, *iltifāt* becomes not a type of the so-called “elegant variation” but a normal element in the interaction between a speaker and a live audience. Part of the challenge of studying the language of the Qur'ān consists in reconstructing, through study of Classical Arabic poetry and through an imaginative or empathetic exercise, that living context.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 7

Poetry and Language

Navid Kermani

The prophet Muḥammad lived from 570 to 632 CE. He had his first visions at the age of forty and, more importantly, his first auditions which continued to recur up to his death twenty-two years later. He recited these revelations to his countrymen, primarily to the people of Mecca, but also to the Arab people as a whole. He conveyed an “Arabic recitation,” *Qurʾān ʿarabī*. The word *Qurʾān* literally means “recitation” or “that to be recited,” often mentioned in the early *sūras* without an article, hence not yet used as a proper noun (as-Said 1975; Graham 1987; Neuwirth 1996). The *Qurʾān* always distinguishes between an “Arabic” and some “foreign language” (*aʿjamī*) revelation, which is not specifically addressed to Arabs (Izutsu 1964). Indeed, I cannot think of any other historical religious text that refers so often and so explicitly to the foregone conclusion that the revelation is expressed in a specific language.

If We had made it a non-Arabic *Qurʾān* (*Qurʾān aʿjamī*), they would assuredly have said: “Why are its verses not clear? What! A non-Arabic *Qurʾān* and an Arabic messenger?” (Q 41:44)

Muḥammad claimed to be the “Arabic” proclaimer of a message sent by God to all people. “We have sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people, that he might make all clear to them” (Q 14:4). This notion presupposes that Arabs felt part of one society, distinct from other non-Arabic societies and peoples. What is now taken to be a matter of fact is not at all so if we consider the political situation, geographical boundaries, and the tribal structure of society on the Arabic peninsula in the seventh century. The Arabs of the *jāhiliyya* or pre-Islamic era did not form an alliance nor did they share

a common political platform. On the contrary, tribes fought with one another and blood feuds racked the country. The single major organization was the tribe, influencing the worldview and personal ties of each individual. Yet the numerous, warring tribes did feel united as a people. It was the language that constituted the unifying element transcending all conflicts on the seventh-century Arabic peninsula. While many tribal dialects were mutually unintelligible, the formalized language of poetry, the *‘arabiyya*, towered above all dialects (Zwettler 1978; Versteegh 1997). Poetry forged a common identity, overcoming this fragmentation to provide the basis for a homogeneous memory.

The situation might be compared to Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century when literature helped small, miniature states to develop a cohesive, specifically “German” identity. And yet it was different. The Arabs of the early seventh century were Bedouins or desert nomads, linked only by caravans of traders and frequent wars between the tribes, who constituted an independent economic sector. Otherwise, there was little or no contact between the tribes and virtually no means of communication. The written word was not widely disseminated, and most people were, in fact, illiterate and the differences between dialects made communication difficult. Yet still, throughout the Arabic region, which was a third of the size of all Europe, and spread from Yemen in the south to Syria in the north, from the borders of modern Iraq to the borders of Egypt, old Arabic poetry with its formal language, sophisticated techniques, and extremely strict norms and standards was identical. “How this was achieved, we do not know and most probably shall never learn,” remarked the Israeli Orientalist, Shlomo D. Goitein, on this astonishing phenomenon (Goitein 1966: 6).

Old Arabic poetry is a highly complex phenomenon. The vocabulary, grammatical idiosyncrasies, and strict norms were passed down from generation to generation, and only the most gifted students fully mastered the language. A person had to study for years, sometimes even decades, under a master poet before laying claim to the title of poet. Muḥammad grew up in a world which almost religiously revered poetic expression. He had not studied the difficult craft of poetry when he started reciting verses publicly. Initially, the Qur’ān was not a written work; it consisted of a variety of separate recitations which were later compiled in one body of work. The first *sūras* were dominated by gripping, apocalyptic scenarios, appeals for a return to spiritual and moral values, the equality of man and his responsibility to himself and others. The language was extremely powerful, captivating contemporary audiences with its pulsating rhythms, striking use of sound patterns, and a fantastical matrix of images (Sells 1999; Boullata 2000). Yet Muḥammad’s recitations differed from poetry and from the rhyming prose of the soothsayers, the other conventional form of inspired, metrical speech at that time. The norms of old Arabic poetry were strangely transformed, the subjects developed differently, and the meter was abandoned. While poetry was, in political terms, generally conservative, reinforcing the moral and social order of the day, the whole impetus of the early Qur’ān, its topics, metaphors, and ideological thrust, was towards revolutionary change. All this was new to Muḥammad’s contemporaries. On the other hand, however, the way the verses were used conformed to the rules of old Arabic poetry. And, more important still, the Qur’ān was written in the *‘arabiyya*, the

code, as it were, of contemporary poetry. Therefore, despite the discrepancies in form and content, many listeners initially perceived Muḥammad as a poet.

The Qurʾān traces its own reception to an extent which seems unprecedented for a revelatory text: it documents the reactions of both believing and unbelieving audiences in series of citations and comments. The Qurʾān itself reveals that the criticism most likely to incense the prophet was the claim that he was a mere poet. Although in later *sūras* the response to this claim is rather stereotypical, the minuteness of detail, especially in early accounts, indicates that this allegation must have been seen as a real threat. It is safe to assume that certain actions, conduct, or speeches led to Muḥammad being labeled a poet, especially in the first phase of the revelation. If, after all, nothing in his performance evoked this comparison, his opponents would have sought other ways of undermining his claim to be a prophet. They could have accused him of being a liar, a thief, or a charlatan: “But what they said was: he just composes poetry, he is a poet” (Q 21:5). The claim by Muḥammad’s opponents that the Qurʾān was poetry cannot have been purely polemic, but must have reflected what many people felt: not because the collective consciousness identified the Qurʾān with poetry, but because poetry (and the other genres of inspired speech) were the only ones people could relate it to at all, it being “the least different.” Early Muslim sources regularly note that the people of Mecca consulted poets and other literary masters for advice on how to technically categorize Muḥammad’s recitations. These “experts” – both astonished and fascinated – most often replied that the Qurʾān was neither poetry nor rhyming prose, thus defining the boundaries for evaluating the Qurʾān. “I know many Qasides and *rajaz* verses, and am even familiar with the poems of the Jinnee. But, by God, his recitation is like none of them,” remarked one famous poet, Walīd b. Mughīra (Ibn Kathīr 1987: I, 499), echoing the perception of many of Muḥammad’s contemporaries, how it was memorized by later generations. Yet while sources consistently insist that the poets and orators were aware of the stylistic difference of the Qurʾān, they acknowledged that simple people found it hard to clearly distinguish between poetry and revelation. The tradition tells how the poet and prophet’s companion, ‘Abd Allāh b. Rawāḥa, was surprised and challenged by his wife as he was leaving a concubine’s chambers. She had long harbored the suspicion that he was having a clandestine affair. Knowing that ‘Abd Allāh had sworn never to recite the Qurʾān unless he was ritually pure (which he would not have been after an act of adultery), she asks him to read from the Qurʾān in order to show him up. The poet immediately reads three verses of a poem that sound so like the Qurʾān that his wife exonerates him, thinking “it was a Qurʾān” (Ibn Manẓūr 1956: VII, 183).

The danger of being wrongly identified as poetry forced the Qurʾān to distance itself from it. The poets were, after all, direct rivals, since they both used the same formal language, the *ʿarabiyya*, both invoked heavenly powers, and, like the prophet, both claimed to be the supreme authorities of their communities (Zwettler 1991). “And the poets – the perverse follow them” (Q 26:24). The polemic against poets can only be understood in this context, and a good example can be found in *sūra* 26. The argument had nothing to do with literary rivalry. It was a contest for leadership, but not just the leadership of a single tribe, as enjoyed by the poets. The entire tribal structure of Arabic society with its polytheism was challenged by the Qurʾān, since it proclaimed the principle of unity,

i.e., the unity of God and the unity of the community. Poets, on the other hand, represented more than any other social group the social and spiritual order of the *jāhiliyya*, which was characterized politically by tribalism, and spiritually by polytheism. Contrary to popular claims, the Qurʾān is not generally anti-poetry. Poets are criticized in a very concrete context, some of them being labeled as those who insist on their leadership role and are inspired by demons. In the same passage, specifically excluded from this criticism are poets who “believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God oft” (Q 26:227).

Obviously, the prophet succeeded in this conflict with the poets, otherwise Islam would not have spread like wildfire. The Qurʾān itself just obliquely refers to the reasons for its success. It may reflect upon the situation at the time of the revelation, mentioning real events and developments, but it does so for audiences already familiar with these events. So, unlike the history books, it does not relate what happened on a particular day, but just relies on keywords to jolt the memory of the listener. Modern readers, who in general accept Muslim historiography as a relevant source, often have to consult secondary sources to reconstruct the historical context, including biographies, history books, or writings on the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*).

In the Western view of the early development of Islam, it was social, ideological, propagandistic, or military reasons for the success of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission. Western historians have acknowledged the prophet’s charisma and his egalitarian message. Yet Muslim sources paint a different picture. Over the ages they have emphasized the literary quality of the Qurʾān as a decisive factor for the spread of Islam among seventh-century Arabs. They refer to the numerous stories in Muslim literature that recount the overwhelming effect of Qurʾān recitation on Muḥammad’s contemporaries, tales about people spontaneously converting, crying, screaming, falling into ecstasy, fainting, or even dying while hearing verses from the Qurʾān. Over the centuries, Muḥammad’s conflict with the poets was more and more portrayed in terms of a literary struggle, enacted partly in the imagery of a classical poet’s duel. The following – clearly invented (Nöldeke 1967; Kister 1980) – anecdote by the greatest Arabic poet, Labīd b. Rabīʿa (d. ca. 40/660–1), is proof of this. As a sign of his supremacy, Labīd nailed his poems to the entrance to the Kaʿba. None of Labīd’s rivals dared challenge his authority by pinning their own verses next to Labīd’s. One day, though, a group of followers of Muḥammad approached the gate. At that time, Muḥammad was denounced by contemporary pagan Arab society as an obscure sorcerer and deranged poet. They pinned up a passage from the second *sūra* of the Qurʾān and called upon Labīd to read it aloud. The King-Poet laughed at their impudence. Still, either to pass the time or to mock them, he agreed to recite the verses. Overwhelmed by their beauty, he converted to Islam on the spot (Lane 1843: 88).

This type of conversion is a recurring image in early Muslim historical sources, and the later these sources are, the more embellished the aesthetic power of the Qurʾān looks (Juynboll 1974; Kermani 2000). One story tells of the poet and nobleman al-Ṭufayl b. ʿAmr al-Dawsī. When he arrived at Mecca some men of the Quraysh called on him, warning him about Muḥammad’s magic speeches. They urgently advised him not to listen to his recitations. “By God, they were so persistent that I indeed decided neither

to listen to anything he said nor to speak to him," al-Ṭufayl is quoted as saying in Ibn Ishāq's early biography of the prophet. The poet even stuffed wool in his ears, "fearing that some of his words still might get through, whereas I did not want to hear any of it." In the Ka'ba, al-Ṭufayl eventually met the prophet performing his prayer. "Here I am, an intelligent man and poet, I can distinguish between the beautiful and the repulsive," he said to himself. "So what is to prevent me from listening to what this man is saying?" He took the wool out of his ears, followed Muḥammad to his house, and asked him to recite something. On the spot al-Ṭufayl converted to Islam, stating, "By God, never before have I heard a word more beautiful than this." He returned to his clan and won the majority of his companions over to Islam (Ibn Hishām n.d.: 175f.). The Sirens in the twelfth book of Homer's *Odyssey* could not have been more seductive.

The idiosyncratic nature of these identical accounts of conversion – which, incidentally, always feature one or more protagonists who do not like or do not know of the prophet, listen to a few verses from the Qur'ān, and convert to Islam on the spot – is obvious if we search for comparisons in other religions. The phenomenon of a conversion inspired – in the narrow sense – by an aesthetic experience often recurs even in later Islam but is relatively seldom found in Christianity. Neither in the Gospels nor elsewhere are similar accounts reported with any comparable frequency. As far as we know from autobiographical testimonies, the legendary conversions and initiation events in Christian history – Paul, Augustine, Pascal, or Luther, for instance – were triggered by other, equally remarkable but not primarily aesthetic experiences. It is not the beauty of divine revelation but the moral and ethical message which is the most striking feature of these accounts. This does not imply that the evolution and practice of Christianity – or any other religion – can be imagined without the aesthetic fascination of specific sites, texts, hymns, images, scents, actions, gestures, and garments. Protestantism would never have spread so quickly in the German-speaking regions if it had not been for the rhetorical force of Luther's Bible. Yet in the portrayal of their past by the Christian, or more specifically, Protestant community, the aesthetic momentum is less significant, however relevant its role in religious practice. Few Christians would claim that the disciples followed Jesus because he was so handsome or spoke so eloquently. In turn, Christian religious instruction would hardly teach that the triumph of Christianity was due to the stylistic perfection of the Gospels. Surely there were conversions to Christianity inspired by the beauty of the scriptures, but these are not treated as a literary topos in the body of testimonies on the propagation of Christianity. They are also not treated as a topos in the literature on the history of the salvation of humankind by God. But, for Muslims, the aesthetic fascination with the Qur'ān is an integral part of their religious tradition. It is this collective awakening, interpretation of theological reflection on the aesthetics of the text which specifically defines the religious world of Islam – and not the aesthetic experience as such, which seems to occur during the reception of any sacred texts. Only in Islam did the rationalization of aesthetic experience culminate in a distinct theological doctrine of poetics, the *iḥzāz*, based on the superiority and inimitability of the Qur'ān (Neuwirth 1983). For a Christian, the reasoning of the *iḥzāz* is highly peculiar: I believe in the Qur'ān because the language is too perfect to have been composed by man. One can see this as an aesthetic proof of God or truth. In Western

civilization, virtually no equivalent exists in the sphere of religion. The nearest we get is perhaps our subjective response to certain works of, say, Bach or Mozart. Typically enough, audiences often refer to them as “divine.”

For centuries, the relationship between revelation and poetry in Arabic cultural history was as close as at the start of the revelation. In fact, literary study owes its existence to the Qurʾān. If the miracle of Islam is the language of revelation, then the language of the Qurʾān must be analyzed in literary terms and, to prove its superiority, be compared to other texts, that is, poetry. The initial thrust was apologetic, but literary interest soon departed from the theological context. Particularly beginning in the fourth/tenth to sixth/twelfth centuries, great works on Arabic poetics were produced, anticipating many of the findings of modern linguistics and literary studies. Arabic rhetoricians discussed the Qurʾān and poetry together, refusing to play one off against the other. The most fascinating example of this kind of scholarship seems to me the Iranian ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078 or 474/1081), a leading theologian and literary scholar of the fifth/eleventh century, who consistently focused on the specific merits of the poetical language as such, be it in the Qurʾān or in poetry. Anticipating many findings of twentieth-century structuralism and semiotics, al-Jurjānī analyzed the specifics of the poetical use of language by comparing the Qurʾān and poetry – an interweaving of theology and literary studies hardly conceivable in today’s Arabic world, in terms of both academic precision and theological legitimacy (al-Jurjānī 1984; Abu Deeb 1979).

I have spoken of literary studies which, inspired by the Qurʾān, was soon to become autonomous. The Qurʾān had a paradoxical effect on poetry itself, secularizing it in a way. Following the triumph of Islam, poets initially relinquished their metaphysical claim and focused on secular motives instead, such as love, court and urban life, and the virtues. Later, in the second/eighth and third/ninth century, they repositioned themselves in the ʿAbbāsīd courts and cities by distancing themselves from Islam. In deliberate rivalry to prophetic revelation, they sought other sources of inspiration than the concept of one God, such as the *jinn* and Satan. The best-known satanic verses were written by Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 198/813), probably the best-known poet in Arabic literature. Yet, similar to Europe in the modern era, the recourse to transcendental powers was more a literary motif than one based on real experience. The aim was to break Islam’s monopoly on inspiration. Poets competed with the Qurʾān, striving to surpass it stylistically. In the second/eighth century, poets and writers like Bashshār b. Burd (d. ca. 167/784), Šāliḥ b. ʿAbd al-Quddūs (d. ca. 167/783), and ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd b. Yaḥyā al-Kātib (d. 132/750) met in literary circles, above all in Basra. They spurred each other on with comments like, “Your poem is better than this or that verse in the Qurʾān,” or “That line is more beautiful than such and such a verse in the Qurʾān,” and so forth (Goldziher 1889/90: II, 402). Up to the middle of the fifth/eleventh century, in fact, intellectuals like al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) or al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058) continued to challenge the superiority of Qurʾānic language. Nevertheless, the Qurʾān remained a model or yardstick even for those who denied the miraculous character of Qurʾānic language. Indeed, one of the mentioned poets of Basra, Bashshār b. Burd, reportedly boasted that one of his own poems, recited by a singer in Baghdad, was superior even to the 59th *sūra*. Surely, he was convinced by his own poetry – but even he seems not to have thought badly at all of the stylistic quality of the Qurʾān.

As much as poets contested the Qur'ān, theologians criticized poetry. Arabic poetry was the revelation's main rival, posing an even greater threat than other religions gaining ground in Muslim regions. The relationship between the two was, and in some ways still is, highly ambivalent. In Arabic tradition, poetry was the only medium, apart from the revelation – and later mystical discourses – that was acknowledged to have access, albeit limited in transcendental reality, to supernatural inspiration. This occurs even where poetry is rejected, because this claim is accepted (otherwise, being insignificant, it could have been dismissed), despite being seen as dangerous and blasphemous.

This view of poetry as potentially blasphemous became one of the fundamental themes of Arabic literature. As long as it remained secular, it was rarely subjected to moral or political restrictions within Muslim culture. Yet, once it competed directly with religion, be it via reference to divine sources of inspiration or attempts to imitate and surpass the Qur'ān stylistically, poets became targets of religiously motivated criticism and were sometimes persecuted. From a modern perspective, these attacks on orthodox or simply traditional religion link them to “the Promethean enterprise of modern poetry,” as Octavio Paz describes it, that is, the wish to create “a new sacred order to challenge the modern Church” (Paz 1990: 148). The Syrian poet Adonis (b. 1930) is one of the major figures in the Arabic world committed to this ancient yet new undertaking. His work can be read as a passionate, at times violent, at times tender exploration of his own intellectual and aesthetic tradition. There is a religious thrust to his work but one which makes it impious. Adonis does not write religious poetry, that is, poetry that serves the cause of religion; his poetry actually contests the status of religion. In this, he identifies with the role of the poet in the *jāhiliyya*, whose prophetic claims are rejected by Islam, and, furthermore, with mystical poets like al-Hallāj (d. 309/922) and al-Niffarī who wrote in the fourth/tenth century. The mystical poets, however, helped reinstate the metaphysical seriousness of poetry, which had been more or less secularized by Islam, and the invocation of demons, angels, or Satan was more a formal device than an expression of a real transcendental experience. They elevated poetry to the level of prophetic vision. At the same time, they dismissed the canon of rules governing Arabic poetic tradition in an effort to forge a new linguistic and intellectual reality, just as, says Adonis, the Qur'ān had done in bygone times, and as he also does in his own poetry. Unlike mystical poets, who saw themselves as Muslims and justified their breach of conventional aesthetic and religious norms in religious terms, Adonis rejects any Islamic connotation whatsoever. He sheds religion, but instead of ignoring it like many of his contemporaries, he analyzes the shedding process.

Today I burnt the phantom of Saturday
 I burnt the phantom of Friday
 Today I threw away the mask of the house
 And replaced the blind God of stone
 And the God of seven days
 With a dead God.
 (Adonis 1998: 52)

Adonis epitomizes the aforementioned ambivalence between the Qurʾān and poetry. He substitutes the God of seven days with a dead God. Yet this is the very poet who praises the Qurʾān as the source of modernity in Arabic poetry (Adonis 1985: 50f.). In his theoretical work, Adonis analyzes the language of the Qurʾān in detail, its literary and aesthetic provocative power, and its breach with traditional norms.

Indeed, the Qurʾān enriched Arabic poetry more than any other text. It liberated it from the narrow framework of existing genres and inspired new approaches to language, imagery, and the use of motifs. Conventional standards and the theoretical analysis of language and literature can both be traced to the hermeneutics of the Qurʾān. Just as theologians referred to poetry to analyze the language of the Qurʾān, the reverse also happened and still does: poets and literary scholars refer to the Qurʾān in order to analyze poetry. One example is the movement of so-called “modernists” (*muḥdathūn*) in Arabic poetry, who dominated literary debate in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. The imagery of the Qurʾān and its stylistic departures from the strict formal rules of poetry inspired the “modernists” to introduce new rhetorical devices and replace traditional norms. In the purely literary-aesthetic discussion of poetry conducted by the modernists, the Qurʾān was the obvious key reference point because of its poetic structure.

Adonis, too, is in fact an example of the literary power of the Qurʾān. The language of his poetry absorbs the language of the Qurʾān, reconstructing it and dismantling it from within. And the language he chooses is none other than the *ʿarabiyya*, the 1,500-year-old literary language of the Arabs. It is both a curse and a blessing: a language which even in pre-Islamic times had already matured into a structure of breath-taking complexity, regularity, and semantic density, largely removed from the common vernacular, which consisted of dozens of dialects. A language which still retains virtually the same form and structure has hardly changed, and whose strict metrical norms are still taught. The durability of the language is mainly due to the Qurʾān, whose use of the idiom of old Arabic poetry has given it unique normative power (Fück 1950). Apart from Sanskrit, Arabic grammar may be the only grammar in which the rules are not based on linguistic reality. In both theory and practice, these are based on one single book, whose grammatical reality – unchanged since the era of pre-Islamic poetry – ignored everyday communication to become a truly absolute standard.

Roman Jakobson once raised the following question: how would Russian literary language have flourished “if the Ukrainian poet Gogol had not appeared on the scene speaking poor Russian” (Jakobson 1993: 68 f.)? The Arabic world may have had also its Gogols, but the existence of a divine model did prevent the transformation of its linguistic norms as it has happened within the Russian language. Uniquely, Arabic grammatical rules and the aesthetic norm are scarcely affected by the inexorable passage of time. Instead, for centuries, a historical expression of language has been enshrined as the ideal; only the finer points are examined and described in increasing depth by grammarians, and while it is judged inaccessible, it is the duty of every literary scholar and rhetorician to try to understand it.

Arabic is thus an extreme example of how sacral languages are consciously kept static and, while unable to prevent it totally, very effectively block the evolution of a language. Yet, at the same time, colloquial language continues to evolve just like in

every other culture; external influences, for instance, seep into the language, keeping sources of lively perception and description alive in a dynamic environment. Clifford Geertz (1976: 1490) spoke of a “linguistic schizophrenia” – the formal language is upheld as the only true language, although it has become increasingly removed from real, everyday language and has to be learned almost as a foreign language. None of the Arabic dialects developed into a formally distinct language as happened in Italian. Even if the dialects virtually constitute a separate language as in Maghreb, they are not seen as such. Although the differences between the local vernacular and educated language are greater than between Latin and Italian, they are still defined as dialects. The reason is that Arabs still define themselves – Muslim Arabs, Christians, and even Jewish Arabs well into the twentieth century – as a community solely defined by the language, that is, the 1,400-year-old language of poetry and the Qurʾān (Chejne 1969: 18 ff.).

But, unlike Latin, Classical Arabic is still a living language, existing parallel to the dialects. It is the official language, and the language of science and poetry. This unique resilience is due to the Qurʾān, which, written in the idiom of old Arabic poetry, acquired unique normative power. However, one is rarely conscious that modern educated Arabic is not identical to the language of the Qurʾān, but is grammatically, morphologically, and acoustically far more simple. Nevertheless, the listener unconsciously perceives modern high Arabic as an old, venerable language and instinctively equates it with ancient Arabic literature. As a result, Arabic poets who have mastered the subtleties of Classical Arabic find it easy to generate a mythical aura. It is far harder to imbue this language with a sense of contemporaneity. Modern Arabic poetry regularly attempts this, often with considerable success.

At the same time, vernacular poetry continues to flourish today. Great poets and singers spontaneously compose poetry during performances and enjoy enormous prestige among all classes of society. But this poetry was and still is assigned to popular culture, which is strictly divorced from high culture. Now, however, some young poets are consciously opting for simple, modern language, and, instead of wrestling with classical standards, choose to simply ignore them. At an intellectual and culturo-political level, this is innovative and honest, but at an aesthetic level, as far as I can see, it has not been too successful. Many young poets simply do not bother with the rules and tonal diversity of Arabic literary language, which must be mastered in order to destroy it. Their poetry is closer to colloquial language, their delivery as monotonous and commonplace as poetry readings in Europe nowadays. In a milieu steeped in bathos, this new brashness could have a quality of directness, but judging from the poems of the young poets I have read or listened to while I was living in Cairo, it tends to fall flat. Their poetry possesses none of the immediacy of spontaneous popular poetry inspired by the people, nor the aura, tonality, or rhythmic quality of classical literary language.

As evidence that the Arabic language may generate some form of verbal magic, and the pure sound of the precisely accentuated words evoke a strangely solemn, almost sacred yet vigorous mood which is totally separate from the semantic meaning, one need only attend a Qurʾānic recitation or a public reading by one of the greatest contemporary poets. Both have preserved the extreme differentiation of the consonants, the wealth of phonetic nuances, and the sometimes exorbitantly lengthy vowels. Both

are a concert of tone and rhythm. The fascination they hold even for listeners who do not speak fluent Arabic is partly due to the succession of highly differentiated, compressed consonants which culminate in a momentous semantic-acoustic explosion, with the vocals extremely drawn out to achieve an air of solemnity. Both the differentiation of the consonants and the melodic vowels are rare, and do not occur in colloquial Arabic. Colloquial Arabic languages have, naturally, reduced the variety of nuances and cropped the vowels to a manageable length. The entire acoustic range of Classical Arabic has only been preserved in poetry and, more extensively, in Qur'anic recitations (Nelson 1985).

Yet this fascination contains its dangers: since, in Muslim interpretation, God chose the wonderful Arabic language to address mankind, it has acquired a status which many of its speakers still find binding, elevating, and sometimes oppressive. This makes Arabic particularly open to stagnation, mythologization, formalization, kitsch, and ideological exploitation, or demagoguery. It is the fascination and danger of all verbal magic, that great, controversial theme of the twentieth century, which preoccupied thinkers like Scholem, Wittgenstein, Benjamin, and Karl Krauss. Anyone who has witnessed a well-phrased, rousing public speech in an Arabic country has felt the powerful, "magical" effect of the language upon the audience.

It is difficult to imagine how such a speech might sound in a different language, removed from the constant presence of a 1,500-year-old language with strong sacral overtones in society, in its theology, literature, and politics. The "mythical" power of language in an Arabic milieu is apparent. A politician, theologian, or poet who starts speaking in Classical Arabic uses a tool which, provided he is a good orator, is sure to captivate a wide audience. Language operates here as a kind of time machine, effectively transporting all present back to a mythical epoch. Even television broadcasts of a speech by, say, Arafat, Qaddafi, or Saddam Hussein had the same effect. But how much more impressive were Nasser's great speeches, whose uprising was due to his extraordinary rhetorical skill.

In the Egyptian film *Nasser 57*, broadcast throughout the Arabic world some years ago, it became clear just how consummately Nasser, portrayed by the actor Aḥmad Zakkī, could manipulate the various levels of the Arabic language, shifting from popular to high Arabic, captivating and persuading audiences by the sheer power of his rhetorical skill. He is proof that the dramatic delivery of punctuated formal Arabic phrases at a crucial moment, even a simple "old-fashioned" turn of phrase like *yā ayyuhā 'l-ikhwa* ("O brethren"), can electrify audiences and link the orator to a 1,500-year-old line of ancestors. Even the crowded cinema in Beirut, where I saw the film in 1996, vibrated with an incredible tension. When, at last, in the final scene, Nasser addressed his audience in the classical vocative, emitting familiar classical phrases from a mask-like face, the tension in the audience was palpable. And, at the end of the speech, when, from the pulpit of Azhar University, Nasser, the socialist, cries out *Allāhu akbar* four times, punctuated by short, pregnant pauses, the wheel comes full circle and he is back where his own history began: he becomes a prophet.

Modern Arabic leaders do not possess Nasser's rhetorical skill, which accounts for their lack of effect. Thus, rival leaders are driven even more to resort to the *'arabiyya*, the

ancient language of the poets, the language of the Qur'ān, which is both a treasure and a weapon. The fascination of fundamentalism is also bound up with language. Their leaders try to speak pure Arabic, untainted by dialects or foreign words. Except superficially, this generally has little to do with the Qur'ān or its dynamics, since the Qur'ān vibrates with energy and a richness of sound, and its fascination lies in its breach of norms. The Arabic spoken by modern fundamentalists is often appallingly trite, puritanical, conformist, and, in fact, artificial. It is, however, perceived as pure and religious, mythical and, in a dull, banal sense, sublime. The mere code of the language becomes a tool used to legitimate their claim to the status of a sacred authority.

Watching Osama bin Laden's first video broadcast after the start of the American air offensive on Afghanistan, I was struck by the exquisite Arabic he spoke. Not once did he slip into dialect, as usually happens with the modern generation of Arabic leaders, nor did he confuse the complicated flexional endings, a mistake made even by intellectuals. He chose antiquated vocabulary, familiar to educated Arabs from religious literature and classical poetry, and avoided neologisms. It was, in a way, the stiff, puritanical, conformist, even artificial Arabic already mentioned, with one significant difference. For the first time, I witnessed a person use the puritanical form so naturally that even I fell under its spell.

The crucial rhetorical point of the speech was not its beauty as such: Osama bin Laden evoked the unadulterated purity of the language. It sounded like a traditional speech. In reality, though, his rhetoric represents a complete break with tradition. The real heirs of this tradition, the Arab theologians of today, speak very differently – if they are rhetorically well educated – with their exquisitely varying enunciation of high Arabic consonants, precise modulation and length of vowels, the result of many years of learning during which they are taught Qur'ānic recitation and eloquence. Osama bin Laden lacked this training, and although he spoke antiquated Arabic, it sounded simple, clear, and modest. In fact, his rhetoric worked precisely because of the lack of rhetorical ornament, and the conscious modesty of expression. This linguistic asceticism marks a rejection of the burden of tradition, a return to pure roots – also symbolized by his attire and location, namely the cave – all the props needed to create a prophetic aura. Even the lack of accentuation in his rhetoric echoes the puritanical Wahhābī spirit, which is allegedly identical with the divine spirit of the prophet. This break with prevailing tradition was most obvious when Osama bin Laden cited phrases from the Qur'ān: while other speakers grotesquely raise and lower their voices when they recite the revelation, Osama bin Laden proceeded in the same solicitous tone, as if he wished to persuade his audience through the clarity of his message alone.

Osama bin Laden rejected the factual history of Islam in order to return to an alleged primordial origin, but he also turned his back on the predominant rhetorical tradition. He rejected ornamentation of any kind, rhetorical devices, in fact, the entire history of interpretation of the Qur'ān, to return to the unadulterated, original wording, the pure, naked scripture. It is no coincidence that, in Christianity, this explicit eschewal of aesthetic splendor is found in Protestantism, particularly Pietism. The rejection by the new Muslim puritans of excessively musical Qur'ānic recitations, especially in Saudi Arabia, is an essential one. A fundamentalist reading of a source text in literary terms could be

defined as the assertion of a single, eternally valid, literal interpretation. Thus, a fundamentalist exegesis negates the diversity of the possible interpretations which, in the theological tradition of Islam, like Judaism, was always seen as a merit.

Classical Muslim interpreters agreed that no verse of the Qurʾān could be reduced to one single, absolute meaning, insisting that the Qurʾān was *dhū wujūh*, implying that it has many faces, similar to the many *pānīm* or faces that Jewish scholars find in the Torah. Today, virtually all secular readings by modern Muslim scholars subscribe to this fundamentalist principle of Muslim exegesis: they insist upon the heterogeneous meaning of the text, including – implicitly or explicitly – the poetry of the Qurʾān, its poetically structured language, since any poetic text can be read and interpreted from many perspectives without affecting its irreproducible singularity. The very heterogeneity of meaning defines the text as poetic, indeed, it stops being poetic once it is unambiguous. It is then reduced to a mere treatise, an ideological manifesto or – in the case of the Revelation text – a mere book of laws. For scholars like the Egyptians Amīn al-Khūlī, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh, and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd or the Iranians ‘Abdolkarim Soroush and Moḥammad Mojtahed Shabestari, this insistence on the heterogeneous meaning of the text and the innovative, variable act of interpretation is related to an emphasis on its aesthetic features (Kermani 1996; Speicher 1997; Taji-Farouki 2004). They know that if the Qurʾān is accepted as a revelation and as a literary monument and body of sound, this will open up a whole cosmos of signs, meanings, and interpretations, and allow it to be read in a multitude of different ways. This relationship to the revelation is diametrically opposed to the claim to a monopoly of interpretation, as more or less advocated by Islamist movements. Therefore, they warn against arbitrariness, stressing the clarity of the divine word and thus neglecting its beauty. The intellectual and often physical conflict surrounding the Qurʾān which is being played out today in the Islamic world is also a conflict about its aesthetic dimension, which some feel is in danger of being lost.

I spoke earlier of the Sirenic effect of Qurʾānic recitation. I would like to finish with a citation from Franz Kafka: “Now the Sirens have an even more terrible weapon than singing: their silence” (Kafka 1983: 58).

Author note

This chapter contains some thoughts and reflections, addressed to a general reader, which were, to a large part, discussed more comprehensively and with detailed bibliographical notes in Kermani (1999). A first version of this chapter was published in German in *Kursbuch* 149 (September 2002), pp. S145–60. A shortened English version of it was also published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) for October 1, 2004. As I do not deal with the Qurʾān as such, but solely with its reception within Arab Muslim communities, I leave out questions of Muḥammad’s historicity and the genesis of the text. The foundational history of Islam is taken here as it is memorized by the community, not as a historical fact. For a methodological outline of that approach cf. Assmann (1992).

Further reading

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CHAPTER 8

Foreign Vocabulary

Michael Carter

The Qurʾān proclaims itself to be an “Arabic Qurʾān” (*Qurʾān ʿarabī*, Q 12:2; 20:113; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3) revealed in “a clear Arabic tongue” (*lisān ʿarabī mubīn*, Q 16:103; 26:195). In Q 16:103 and 41:44 there is an explicit contrast between “Arabic,” *ʿarabī*, and “non-Arabic, foreign,” *aʿjamī*. Interpretations differ on the circumstances and meaning of these last two verses, but the implications are unmistakable: this revelation was delivered in a language familiar to its audience, though it is not certain whether “Arabic” denotes the colloquial speech of the people around Muḥammad or the elevated diction of public address, as used by soothsayers and poets. For the purposes of this chapter the distinction is not important: medieval Muslims regarded the language of the Qurʾān as formally identical with that of poetry, differing only in its divine source of inspiration. In this framework, *mubīn* has to be understood literally as “making or being clear,” and there is no need for the speculation (see Zammit 2002: 37 for references to Corriente) that it meant “falling between, intermediate,” that is, between everyday Arabic and the archaic, fully inflected language of oratory.

Clear though it was intended to be, the Qurʾān contains at least five kinds of linguistic obscurity. There are the famous “mysterious letters” at the beginning of twenty-nine *sūras*, there are the *mutashābihāt*, the “ambiguous verses,” there are the numerous “strange, rare” (*gharīb*) expressions, mostly native words, which puzzled the lexicographers, there are the variants in recitation (*qirāʾāt*), and there are the words which look and sound “foreign” (*aʿjamī*). The presence of foreign words in the Qurʾān was recognized from the start – by no less than the prophet’s cousin and father of exegesis, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās (d. ca. 68/686) – and the early commentators of the second/eighth

century were apparently unconcerned by these non-Arabic elements (Versteegh 1993: 89 ff. lists the source languages mentioned by the first generation of exegetes).

This chapter gives a conspectus of the words in the Qurʾān identified as “foreign” both in the Arabic tradition and in Western scholarship. Certain methodological and ideological issues are deliberately left out of account, either for reasons of space or because they involve insoluble problems of interpretation. No theory of lexical borrowing is applied, no consideration is given to the comparative Semitic or historical linguistic dimensions, and no general conclusions are drawn about the possible dependence of Islam on the religions and cultures whose vocabulary it so abundantly borrowed. This last issue is well beyond the scope of the chapter. The case for Jewish influence has been argued for almost two centuries – Horowitz (1925) may be taken as typical, while Mingana (1927) represents the Christian argument: both are still being debated at varying levels of intensity.

Attitudes of the Medieval Arabs

The Arabs were sensitive to the foreignness of many Qurʾānic words (al-Suyūfī lists more than a hundred; see Rippin 2003: 437), and it behoves us to respect their *Sprachgefühl*, as they identified a number of items independently recognized as foreign by Western scholars also. Jeffery’s account of their efforts is occasionally rather patronizing, and his secondary sources even more so; he cites (1938: 30, n. 4) Dvořák’s notion that some proposed etymologies were motivated by a simple desire to conceal ignorance, a criticism which is directed against Jeffery himself by Tritton (1939–42: 1011) regarding the alleged Ethiopic origin of *khayma*, “tent.”

The medieval Arabs’ knowledge of foreign languages is more empathetically described by Baalbaki, who shows that there were systematic criteria for distinguishing foreign words (1983; also set out in Kopf 1961; *EI2* 2004: *muʿarrab*). A word betrays its foreign origins if it has no known Arabic root, contains an abnormal sequence of phonemes, or is of a shape not commonly found in native Arabic. Thus the patterns *fāʿal* and *fuʿlān* are characteristic of loan words, such as *khātām*, *ʿālam*, *burhān*, *buhtān*, *sultān*, and most famously *qurʾān* itself. We can add words ending in the suffix *-ūt* (e.g., *malakūt*, see below). A delicate case is the name *alyasaʿ*, “Elisha,” whose first element could be mistaken for the definite article *al-* (cf. Jeffery 1938: 68), but al-Farrāʿ (d. 207/822) (1955–72: I, 342) points out that the article is not normally prefixed to proper names beginning with the letter *yāʾ*.

The Qurʾānic passage which is most relevant to our purpose is Q 41:44, where Muḥammad, probably in answer to an objection from his audience, asks a rhetorical question, “What, a foreign [Qurʾān] (*aʿjamī*) and an Arab (*ʿarabī*) [Prophet]?,” usually taken to mean, “How can a revelation in a foreign language be delivered by an Arabic-speaking prophet?”

The Arab responses to this dilemma varied widely, and are summarized by Kopf (1956: 40–5); Jeffery (1938: 4–11); Rippin (1981, 1983b, 2002); Gilliot (1990: 95–110); and Zammit (2002: 51–5); Arabic sources include al-Ṭabarī (1969: I, 13–20); al-Rāzī

(1957–8: I, 134–52); Ibn Fāris (1964: 57–62); al-Jawālīqī (1942: 3–5); al-Rāghib (1972); al-Suyūṭī (1951: I, 136–42; 1972: I, 266–8); see also al-Suyūṭī (1926, 1982) and Rippin (2003).

For the earliest systematic Arab grammarian, Sibawayhi (d. ca. 180/796), foreign words, whether in the Qurʾān or not, had no theological implications. He states firmly that “God’s servants were addressed in their own way of speaking and the Qurʾān came to them in their own language” (1881–5: I, 139; 1898–1900: I, 167), echoing Q 14:4, “We have only sent apostles in the tongue of their people,” but his interest in loan words was limited to their morphology and its consequences for their inflection (1881–5: II, 18f.; 1898–1900: II, 19 [=§300]): assimilated foreign words are fully inflected (he cites the Qurʾānic *zanjabīl*, “ginger,” and *Nūḥ*, “Noah,” among others), while words which do not fit into the Arabic pattern system are only partially inflected, for example, *Ibrāhīm*, “Abraham,” *Firʿawn*, “Pharaoh.” But he was chided for including the “Arab” prophet Hūd among the foreign names because of its resemblance to *Nūḥ*! Elsewhere in Sibawayhi’s *Kitāb* (1881–5: II, 375–6; 1898–1900: II, 342–3 [=§§524–5]) he discusses the assimilation (or not) of foreign words to native patterns and the phonetic changes that borrowings undergo, but again he mingles Qurʾānic and secular vocabulary indiscriminately.

The wide divergence of opinion on this topic can be appreciated from the following brief survey, based largely on Kopf (1956):

1 Abū ʿUbayda (d. 209/824–5) denied the existence of foreign words altogether in the Qurʾān; the very thought was blasphemous to him. In this he may have been striving to assert the linguistic and cultural independence of the Arabs, in particular from the Persians, perhaps reflecting his membership of the Khārījī sect, which would encourage such an exclusive approach to the Qurʾān.

2 Al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) argued that the alleged borrowings might look foreign but they are genuine Arabic, although not found in every dialect. In any case such a (supradialectal) breadth of vocabulary was beyond the powers of all but prophets. Given the fundamental role of language in al-Shāfiʿī’s legal theory, his position can be seen as an attempt to eliminate the issue of foreign elements in the authoritative textual sources of the law.

3 Abū ʿUbayd (d. 224/838) quotes with approval several early authorities saying that there are indeed foreign words in the Qurʾān, but they were naturalized in Arabic long before the revelation, in which he was followed by, among others, Abū Ḥatīm al-Rāzī (d. 322/933–4), Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004), Abū Maṣūʿ al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038), al-Jawālīqī (d. 539/1144), ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Thaʿālibī (d. 873/1468), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505; see Rippin 2003). This is essentially a philological approach (Abū ʿUbayd consciously distinguishes it from that of the lawyers), concerned mainly with the linguistic form of the words rather than the legal or theological aspects. Al-Jawālīqī, for instance, disposes of the whole question in just over a page, and freely intersperses Qurʾānic and non-Qurʾānic words in the body of his work. One effect, if not the primary aim of this position, was to refute claims that Muḥammad depended on

outside informants, or that Arabic was insufficient to convey the message without the aid of loan words.

Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī, a Persian by birth, represents a transitional stage (or perhaps merely an individual viewpoint) between Abū ʿUbayda (see no. 1 above) and al-Ṭabarī (no. 4 below). Section 1 of chapter 29 (1861: 162–5) of his *Fiqh al-lughā* is a list of words “whose [original] Persianness has been forgotten, but which are still spoken and used in Arabic,” a curious anthology of mainly secular terms, hardly any of them looking Persian in the least (though some do occur in the Qurʾān). Section 2 of the chapter, entitled “Words whose Persianness is largely impossible,” consists of thirty-four entirely “Islamic” neologisms of the kind we shall meet below, *muʾmin*, *kāfir*, *qurʾān*, and so forth, and uniquely Qurʾānic words such as *jibt*, *sijjīn*, and *salsabīl*. Section 3 identifies seven words as being the same in Persian and Arabic: *tannūr*, “oven,” *khamīr*, “leavened dough,” *zamān*, “time,” *dīn*, “religion,” *kanz*, “treasure,” *dīnār*, “dinar,” and *dirham*, “dirham.” The two concluding sections, 4 and 5, contain words which the Arabs were “obliged” to borrow from Persian and Greek respectively: to be sure there are Qurʾānic items in both these lists, but, significantly, they carry no religious weight, for example, *ibrīq*, “water jug,” *yāqūt*, “ruby,” *zanjabīl*, “ginger,” *misk*, “musk,” *kāfūr*, “camphor,” *qistās*, “balance, scale,” *qintār*, “measure of weight.” If (following Kopf 1956: 29, n. 5) we replace al-Thaʿālibī’s non-Qurʾānic *zamān* and *khamīr* in section 3 with the orthographically very similar *rummān*, “pomegranate,” and *khamr*, “wine,” found in the Qurʾān, those seven stateless words become quarantined, as it were, while a number of trivial secular borrowings are conceded in sections 1, 4, and 5, thereby reinforcing the linguistic autonomy of the purely Islamic technical vocabulary in section 2.

4 The great exegete and historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) inverted the principle that “in the Qurʾān is something of every language” into “some of the things in the Qurʾān are common to all languages.” Consequently words which look foreign are really native Arabic and the resemblance is coincidental. A word like *tannūr* (Q 11:42; 23:27), “oven,” is found in all languages, and there is no way of telling which one may have been derived from another. Al-Ṭabarī’s concept of history required that Arabic should be seen as independent of other languages: even more than al-Shāfiʿī, he recognized that Islam was founded on the written record of its past, a much wider ambition than al-Shāfiʿī’s juridical focus.

5 A modification of this view is credited to one of al-Suyūṭī’s informants (accepting the correction by Kopf 1956: 30, n. 3, of the reading in Jeffery 1938: 9 of al-Suyūṭī 1951: I, 137) where it is stated that when there is an identical form in another language it might well have been used before it appeared in Arabic, because Arabic is the most copious and accommodating of all languages.

6 Al-Juwaynī (presumably the teacher of al-Ghazālī who died 478/1085) offers a sociological justification for foreign words. In order to make the message more persuasive God had to promise great luxuries such as the silks and brocades mentioned

in the Qurʾān, which only became known to the Arabs through their contact with other nations.

7 An anonymous source in al-Suyūfī argues that a few loan words in the Qurʾān do not make it foreign any more than a Persian poem ceases to be Persian just because it has Arabic words in it. Al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868–9) produced the idiosyncratic theory that the presence of loan words was intended to heighten the contrast between the native (i.e., pagan) tradition of poetry and the revealed religion, and they were one of the signs of inimitability (*iʿjāz*, see references to Hamzaoui in Zammit 2002: 52, and nn. 112–14).

The situation today probably ranges over the same spectrum. In Jeffery’s time al-Ṭabarī’s position was “seriously defended at the present day by the ultra-orthodox” (1938: 8), and sixty-four years later it is reported that modern Islamists firmly oppose the idea of foreign words (Zammit 2002: 54). The Egyptian editor of al-Jawālīqī (first published 1942) makes a point of stating in his footnotes for every occurrence of a Qurʾānic word that its mere presence in the Qurʾān proves that it is not foreign! But this extreme position is not universal. One randomly sampled Internet discussion of “foreign words in the Qurʾān” simply reproduced Abū ‘Ubayd’s moderate opinion.

It was also recognized that the Qurʾān contains dialect words, which were obviously unfamiliar to many Arabs. Jeffery (1938: 9, n. 3) dismisses this as irrelevant to his purpose, which is not unreasonable, but there is still work to be done, considering that some of the words labeled “foreign” by Jeffery are treated as native dialect words in Arabic sources, such as *arīka*, “couch,” and *maṣṭūr*, “written.” Conversely some difficult words are assigned to a foreign origin by Arab scholars but not by Jeffery. A good example is *ghaṣṣāq* (Q 38:57; 78:25, of very obscure meaning, see Rippin 1983b: 315f.), which has Semitic cognates, and so may well be a native Arabic word, but which was so impenetrable to the medieval Arab exegetes that it was declared to have Tokharian (Gilliot 1990: 107, n. 3), Coptic, or Turkish origins (Jeffery 1938: 29). Significantly the Arab sources generally deal with the dialect words first, before turning to the foreign vocabulary, and the techniques for identifying them are similar.

Bibliographical Resources

The single most influential treatise on foreign words remains the great synthesis of Jeffery (1938), whose bibliography is an almost exhaustive repertoire of previous scholarship. Subsequent work has been mostly concerned with individual words (cf. below), and disputing or elaborating on his etymologies (notably the Persian; see Widengren 1955), but in the end the inventory of borrowings has not been greatly enlarged. Pennacchio (2011) makes a number of pertinent criticisms of Jeffery, both the contents and his methodology, but her recommendations still need to be put into effect.

In addition to Pennacchio, there are general reviews of the topic, usually relying on Jeffery, in Schall (1982), Gilliot and Larcher (2003), Rippin (2002), and Zammit (2002). It goes without saying that the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (EI2 2004) and the *Encyclopaedia of*

the *Qurʾān* (EQ) have articles on many individual words, though they seldom go far beyond Jeffery. The old *Dictionary and Glossary of the Kor-ân* by Penrice (1873) is still useful, as its many reprints testify, and there are now three recent reference works which provide some basic information about loan words: Ambros and Prochazka (2004), Badawi and Abdel Haleem (2008), and the *Dictionnaire du Coran*, edited by Amir-Moezzi (2007).

For tracing the complete Qurʾānic vocabulary there are now CD and on-line concordances (see Rippin 1999–2000). For simply looking up words the best traditional resource remains the *Muʿjam al-mufahras* of ʿAbd al-Bāqī (1945), which quotes the words in context. However, consistency is not always achieved with proper names which are morphologically obscure. Thus Yaḥyā, “John,” Sulaymān, “Solomon,” and Ishāq, “Isaac,” are entered under “Arabic” roots *ḥ-y-y*, *s-l-m*, and *s-ḥ-q* respectively, while Yaʿqūb, “Jacob,” Ilyās, “Elijah,” and others are listed alphabetically, even though Yaʿqūb has a recognized Arabic pattern.

The Scope of Jeffery and Supplementary Studies

Zammit (2002: 55 ff.) has counted 322 words in Jeffery’s *Foreign Vocabulary*. He calculates that of the 256 borrowed common nouns and adjectives in the Qurʾān, 75 percent are of Northwest Semitic origin (Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac), and of the 66 proper names, 80 percent are from Northwest Semitic. A further 13 percent of the common words and 12 percent of the proper names have a South Arabian origin, leaving 12 percent of common words unclassified. The residual proper names are: one North Arabian (*al-raqīm*), three Greek (*rūm*, “Byzantium,” *shīʾrā*, “Sirius,” Quraysh, “shark”), and two problematical items, *tasnīm* and *al-jūdī*; see further below on all these. However, this arithmetical precision is compromised by the fact that in the case of Aramaic and Syriac loans about half of them cannot be attributed with certainty. These figures also mark for us the limit of the relevance of Zammit’s book to the present chapter, as he excludes all borrowed words from his study (2002: 57).

Additions to Jeffery are dispersed, and not all of them will have been caught here. Margoliouth (1939) proffered eight new words: *minsʾa* (Q 34:14), “scepter,” a transformation from the Hebrew *mishʿeneth*, “staff, scepter”; *lam yatasanna(h)* (Q 2:259), “has not changed,” from the Hebrew root *sh-n-y*, “to change”; *nataqnā* (Q 7:171), “we shook,” from Hebrew or Aramaic *n-t-q* with the sense of pulling up roots; *ḥusbān* in one of its appearances (Q 18:40) has a Hebrew sense of a device or machine (cf. 2 Chronicles 26:15), that is, a *ḥusbān* from heaven which will render the land more fertile. Four of the words are said to be of Ethiopian origin: *asbāb* in Q 40:38, meaning “guardhouses” (but see Paret 1993–6: note on Q 18:84 for an alternative explanation); *rahwan* (Q 44:23) in the sense of “open” for the crossing of the Red Sea; *[lā] ta ʾālaw* (Q 44:18, also 27:30), “[do not] disobey”; and *salaqa* (Q 33:19), “to throw down,” connected with the old Arabic causative *salqā* (= *alqā*), “to throw down.” Two of these, *minsʾa* and *rahw*, had already raised suspicions among the Arabs (but Jeffery 1938: 34 f. calls them “obviously Arabic”), while Luxenberg (2007: 193) arrived independently at the same derivation for *yatasanna(h)*, another word which the Muslims found difficult.

Other words nominated as loans are *muṣaytir* (Q 88:22), “having power over,” which Ahrens (1930: 20) connects with Hebrew *sōter*, “overseer, officer” (cognate with the word for writing which underlies Qur’ānic *ṣaṭara* and derivatives, see Jeffery 1938: 169 f.); *ghurāb* (Q 5:31, twice), “crow,” perhaps connected with Latin *corvus* (EI2 2004: “Ghurāb”); *qawārīr* (Q 27:44; 76:15, 16), “glass [vessels],” from Ethiopic according to Schall (1982: 147) (collocated in Q 27:44 with another Ethiopic loan, *ṣarh*, “tower,” see below); *saqar* (Q 54:48; 74:26, 27, 42), “hell,” from Syriac *shegārā*, the “raging fire,” in the Daniel story (O’Shaughnessy 1961: 463); *sijn* (several times in *sūra* 12, once elsewhere, Q 26:29), “prison,” has been traced to Latin *signum*, either via Greek *signon* (references in EI2 2004: “Sidjn”) or else through Greek to Coptic (references in Schall 1982: 148); *akhlada* (Q 7:176), very obscure, is connected by Schub with Hebrew *heled* denoting the (limited) duration of life, the world as transient, as in Psalms 39:6 and 49:2; [*lan*] *yaḥūra* (Q 81:14), “it will [not] return,” was taken as foreign in some medieval sources (but not by Jeffery 1938: 116), and may be related to the South Arabian *ḥawrāwu*, “immigrant, settler” or the Ethiopic root *h-w-r*, denoting “settle” (Höfner, in Gabrieli 1959: 64); Penrice (1873) remarks that *sarmad* (Q 28:71, 72), “eternal,” is “apparently of mixed Persian and Arabic origin,” though he gives no source for this; Rippin (1990: 162–74) adds *‘arim* (Q 34:16, cf. also Paret 1993–6 on this verse), “dam,” as a South Arabian borrowing. A significant addition to Jeffery is the word *mīhrāb* (used five times), “niche in a mosque,” explained by Robin (1991–3: 152–5) as an Old South Arabian word which the Arabs acquired from the Jews, although Paret on Q 3:37 argues for an Ethiopic origin (therefore Christian), as does Troupeau (1988). There is some support for the latter view in the fact that *minbar*, “pulpit,” another important Islamic term (which does not, however, occur in the Qur’ān) is borrowed from Ethiopic.

The history of some loan words has been revised. *Zabāniya* (Q 96:18), a name of the guardians of hell, is from Syriac according to Jeffery (1938), but has since been given an Iranian etymology, *zendānbān*, “prison warder,” superior to an earlier conjecture reported by Jeffery, *zabāna*, “tongue of flame” (see EI2 2004: “al-Zabāniya,” for reference to Eilers). Iranian precedents are also claimed for *falak*, “heavenly sphere,” by Pagliari (1956); Jeffery (1938) is unhelpful on *falak*, but see EI2 2004: “Falak,” for the complex history of this word, which is not related to *fulk* “ship,” on which see below.

With *‘illiyyūn* (Q 83:18), Margoliouth (1939) reads the first letter as *gh*, corresponding to Syriac *gelayūnā*, a sort of tablet (cf. Isaiah 8:1), which would render the sense of the register of good deeds usually ascribed to this word. For a long time it was assumed that *tawrāt*, “Torah” (eighteen times), is a direct Hebrew loan, with only spelling problems to explain away. But this has been rejected (see EI2 2004: “Tawrāt”) in favor of the view that it is some kind of hybrid of Hebrew *Torah* and Aramaic *Ōriyyah*. Luxenberg (2007: 85–93) nevertheless revives the original etymology with the inventive theory that what looks like a *yā* in the consonantal spelling *twryh* is merely a tick to mark that the stress falls on that syllable.

Luxenberg offers many other ingenious explanations, mostly based on textual emendations. A typical specimen is *muzjāt* (Q 12:88), “not worth much,” explained (2007: 93–6) as a misreading of the Syriac root *raggī*, “to moisten,” that is, “fresh, moist [fruit]”

after Genesis 43:11. This presumes a degree of orthographical confusion which is out of keeping with what is known about the general level of textual accuracy in Muslim scholarship, but Luxenberg has Bellamy (1991, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2002) on his side (see below), also Margoliouth (1939), who felt free to amend *bi-ḥusbān*, “with a reckoning,” in Q 55:4, to *yusabbihāni*, “they [two] praise.” However, Luxenberg does offer (2007: 55–7) an attractive explanation for the spelling of words like *ḥanīf*, “primitive monotheist,” with a terminal *alif* (-ā, but read as -an) implying the dependent case inflection where that is not syntactically plausible: such words, he suggests, were originally borrowed together with their suffixed Syriac definite article -ā, so *ibrāhīm ḥanīf-an* is to be understood as “Abraham the Ḥanīf” by analogy with the equivalent Syriac *abrahām ḥanp-ā*.

Some words in Jeffery are no longer regarded as loans, notably *ʾifrīt* (Q 27:39), “demon” (see Fischer 1904: 871 f., overlooked by Jeffery 1938); *munāfiq*, of frequent use, “hypocrite” (Adang 2002 has a very different explanation which would deny that it is a foreign word at all); *mathānī* (Q 15:87, 39:24), obscure but referring to some part of the revelation (Rubin 2003b states that it is not a loan word but simply means “oft-repeated”). Tritton (1939–42) was not convinced that *ḥabl* (used seven times), “rope,” is ultimately a borrowing from Akkadian, as it seemed to him unlikely that the camel-driving Bedouin would lack a word of their own for this. Boneschi (1945), with no reference to Jeffery, argues that *malak* (frequent use), “angel,” is a native Arabic word from the metathesized root *ʾ-l-k*, “send” (EI2 2004: “Malāʾika,” prefers Jeffery and adds a Ugaritic cognate *mlʾk*). Voller’s proposed Persian origin for *rawḍa*, “garden” (Q 30:15, 42:22) is being challenged, and *ʾankabūt*, “spider,” is now thought to be common Semitic and not an Aramaic import (Blau 1972: 179 ff., further references in Pennacchio 2011: 19, 26 and notes).

A number of other reclassified words will be dealt with below, including disputed proper names such as *jibt* and *al-raqīm*, which have since been demoted to common nouns, and others which have been accounted for as textual corruptions or arbitrary coinages.

The too hard basket: it is greatly to Jeffery’s credit that words which he was unable to account for are on the whole still unexplained, e.g., *abābīl* (Q 105:3), “flocks of birds?”; *al-sāhira* (Q 79:14), meaning unknown; *sundus* (Q 18:30, 44:53, 76:21), glossed as “fine silk” (three etymologies offered for this ancient borrowing); *qaswara* (Q 74:51), “lion?” (but explained by Bellamy 1996: 198 as a misspelling of Syriac *pantorā*, from Greek *panther*); *muhl* (Q 18:29; 44:45; 70:8), “fused brass” or “dregs of oil” (see Schreiner 1977: 111 ff. on Semitic cognates).

Brunschvig draws attention to a number of words and roots which are not found at all in the Qurʾān. Perhaps the most useful result of this lipographical exercise is the discovery that the commonest verb for “to praise” is *sabbaḥa* and its derivatives (a Syriac borrowing, see below), which outnumbers the better known *ḥamida* (as in *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi*, “praise be to God,” and the names Aḥmad and Muḥammad), while other synonyms are lacking altogether (*madaḥa*, *athnā*, and there are just four instances of *majīd*, “glorious, praiseworthy,” only two as epithets of God). This may reflect some influence from Jewish or Christian liturgies (Jeffery 1938 favors the Christians). Curiously, in

Zammit's tables of cognates (2002: 149), only Arabic and Old South Arabian share the meaning of "praise" for the root *ḥ-m-d*, all the other Semitic languages using it to express "desire, covet, take pleasure in." In a similarly negative vein it has been observed that God is never called by the Christian and Jewish titles of "Rock" (Köbert 1961a: 204–5) or "Shepherd" (Künstlinger 1928–30), though Köbert (1961a) does associate the enigmatic term *ṣamad*, applied to God in Q 112:2, with the cognate *ṣamda*, "prominent half-buried rock."

A Classified Presentation of Jeffery's Data

The aim here is to give an overall impression of the extent and diversity of the borrowings and the equally extensive and diverse range of opinions about them. The selection is quite subjective, with no pretense of completeness. The inevitable parade of words will be a panoramic review of the whole army rather than a personal inspection of individual soldiers, and the reader may well end up with no more knowledge of the specifics than a field marshal has of his troops.

Barr's warning (1968: chapter 7) against the dictionary-hunting kind of etymology is still valid: apparent lexical equivalences are unreliable, and he provides figures showing how related languages can vary widely in their shared vocabulary, including a list of some quite common words which are different in all the Semitic languages. The risk of misinterpretation is at its greatest with roots in one language which have the opposite meaning in another (Barr 1968: 173), so Arabic *ʿ-b-y*, "to refuse," but Hebrew "to be willing," Arabic *w-th-b*, "to jump up," in Hebrew and other cognates "to sit down" (a legendary isogloss which led an Arab from the north to jump off a cliff when asked by his South Arabian host to take a seat).

The presentation below opts for a chronological arrangement as being the one which most clearly illustrates the cultural interactions. As already stated, no theory of linguistic borrowing is applied. Instead we accept Jeffery's own intuitive lexical/etymological categories set out in his introduction, which are not invalidated by recent methodological refinements (see Pennacchio 2011), merely superseded. Jeffery identifies the following types of borrowing:

- 1 Words with no Arabic connection, e.g., *istabraḡ*, "silk brocade"; *zanjabīl*, "ginger"; *firdaws*, "Paradise"; *namāriḡ*, "cushions," etc. Such words rarely assimilate and so fail to become productive roots.
- 2 Words for which there are Arabic roots but not in the Qur'ānic meaning, e.g., *bāraka*, "to bless"; *subḡān*, "praise"; *ṣawāmi'*, "cloisters"; *fāṭir*, "creator," etc. These may assimilate and become productive, e.g., *sabbāḡa*, "to praise," denominative from *subḡān*, "praise," which also has a regular verbal noun *tasbīḡ*, "act of praising," and active participle *musabbīḡ*, "praising."
- 3 Words which have had their natural Arabic meanings extended, e.g., *nūr* "[spirital] light"; *kalima* "word, logos."
- 4 Words which defy explanation, e.g., *abābīl*, "flock of birds?"; *qaswara*, "lion?"

From this point on, the Qur'ānic locations will be indicated only in special cases (they are all given in Jeffery 1938). Translations are either *ad hoc* or taken from Jeffery, and his strict alphabetical order is also followed, adopted from al-Suyūṭī, since foreign words cannot always be arranged etymologically by roots in the Arab manner.

The words are grouped into (1) ancient borrowings; (2) pre-Islamic borrowings; and (3) borrowings made during Muḥammad's lifetime. This division is implicit in Schall (1982) and Zammit (2002: 57 f.), who isolates ten of the words in Jeffery's list as ancient and 124 as attested before Islam. The dating is often speculative, and all we can do here is to follow Jeffery's judgment, leaving several scores of words unclassifiable where he pronounces no verdict. Common nouns and adjectives will be dealt with first, then proper names.

Ancient Borrowings

It is well known that the Arabs had contacts with the surrounding civilizations as traders, subjects, and mercenaries. The first reference to "Arabs" occurs in a cuneiform inscription of the ninth century BCE, and a small number of borrowings can safely be attributed to this ancient period. Zimmern (1917) found as many as forty-five words in the Qur'ān of Akkadian origin which had passed through Aramaic (Zammit 2002: 57, n. 140), most of which are taken up by Jeffery. Since they nearly all entered Arabic through Aramaic or Syriac, their remote history is not very relevant to our purpose: for an early specimen of this kind of research see Salonen (1952), who lists sixteen Arabic words whose origins, he claims, must be even older than Sumerian, four of which, or their cognates, do occur in the Qur'ān (*warda*, *sakar*, *fahḥār*, *tijāra*). Jeffery for his part identifies the following as genuinely ancient loans, in some cases directly from Sumerian or Akkadian (less precisely "Mesopotamia"), or Egyptian and other unidentified languages:

abb, "herbage" (Akk., but see Blau 1972: 173 f.); *umma*, "community" (Sum.); *bāb*, "door, gate" (Mesopot.); *tannūr*, "oven"; *dirham* (Mesopot. area), the silver coin; *sullam*, "ladder" (Mesopot.); *siwār*, "bracelet" (Akk.); *ṭabaq*, "stage or degree" (Akk.); *mawākhīr*, "(ships) plowing the waves" (direct from Mesopotamia, but rejected by Luxenberg [2007: 223–6] in favor of a Syriac origin); *nuḥās*, "brass" (non-Semitic, direct or via Aramaic); *yam*, "sea" (non-Semitic source).

Other Qur'ānic words which Jeffery considers to be very early borrowings, if not already common Semitic, are *ajr*, "reward, wage"; *bara'a*, "create"; *bashshara*, "bring good news"; *banā*, "build"; *tijāra*, "commerce"; *rummān*, "pomegranate"; *zayt*, "oil" (possibly non-Semitic, but this is now disputed); *sūq*, "street, market"; *sakar*, "intoxicating drink"; *malik*, "king" (Jeffery is non-committal on this). The word *ba'l*, "husband, master," also "Baal," is found in all the Semitic languages, and appears in pre-Islamic poetry, but there is no way of telling whether it is a native word or came into Arabic from its northern relatives. Since it is recorded in South Arabian inscriptions it must have been in circulation long before Islam.

Though rather limited, this group of words gives some impression of the cultural influence upon the Arabs, who at the time would have still been nomadic pastoralists or mercenaries serving as border troops for the adjacent empires. We have the notion of a community, *umma*, some seafaring terms, signs of commercial relations (*tijāra*, *sūq*), and some metal-working and construction activity.

Pre-Islamic Borrowings

The term “pre-Islamic” here denotes the centuries immediately preceding Islam, that is to say, after the beginning of the Christian era, at a time when we can assume that the Arabic-speaking population of the Peninsula was not only becoming organized into stable tribal units in an increasingly urban territory, but was also highly aware of the Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian religions which permeated their entire region. Mecca lay at the heart of a polyglot commercial network involving many nations. In al-Ḥijr, a dominant trading center about halfway between Mecca and Damascus (and mentioned in Q 15:80, after which the *sūra* is named), inscriptions dating to the third century CE have been preserved in Hebrew, Aramaic, Nabataean, Greek, Latin, several varieties of Old North Arabian, and one, from the third century CE, which is claimed to be the oldest dated inscription in Classical Arabic.

The lists below are grouped by the languages of origin favored by Jeffery, though some are now controversial.

From Ethiopic:

bighāl, “mules”; *jalābīb*, “outer garments”; *ḥizb*, “group, party”; *khubz*, “bread”; *khayma*, “tent”; *ribḥ*, “profit” (if not S. Arabian); *raqq*, “scroll of parchment”; *mishkāṭ*, “niche”; *ṣarḥ*, “tower”; *qalam*, “pen” (ultimately an Indo-European word); *qamiṣ*, “shirt” (ultimately Gk.); *malak*, “angel” (rejected by Boneschi, see above).

From South Arabian:

tubbaʿ, royal title; *raḥmān*, “merciful”; *shirk*, “polytheism”; *ṣuḥuf*, “pages, leaves”; *ṣalawāt*, “places of worship”; *ṣawāmiʿ*, “cloisters, cells”; *ṣūra*, “image”; *wathan*, “idol.”

Since Ethiopians and South Arabians were always in close contact, their loans will be taken together. There are terms for writing and commerce and some basic religious concepts, all of which were doubtless familiar to the Arabs long before Muḥammad started preaching. It may seem strange that a word for “tent” has to be borrowed (Tritton [1939–42: 1011] is skeptical that it is a borrowing at all), but it might have denoted a different kind of shelter from the *bayt shaʿr*, “house of hair,” in which the Northern Arabian Bedouin had lived for centuries. The word *ribḥ*, “profit,” may belong here too, as a borrowing from the south, though Jeffery himself makes no judgment about a date.

One word from this region which later became prominent is *ḥizb*, “group, party,” borrowed from Ethiopic and found also in South Arabian inscriptions. It was revived in

the nineteenth century to denote a political “party,” but it never lost its other, pejorative meaning of a splinter group or faction.

From Persian:

ibrīq, “water jug”; *arā’ik*, “couches [in paradise]”; *istabraq*, “silk brocade”; *junāh*, “sin, crime”; *hūr*, “black-eyed (hourī)” (Luxenberg 2007: 252 ff. disagrees); *zūr*, “falsehood”; *surādiq*, “awning, tent cover”; *sard*, “chain mail”; *fīl*, “elephant”; *kanz*, “treasure”; *misk*, “musk”; *namāriq*, “cushions”; *wazīr*, “minister, counselor.”

These terms hint at an acquaintance with higher political systems and a degree of luxury; the words for “sin” and “falsehood” probably have a political rather than a religious connotation.

From Greek or Latin (all via Syriac):

balad, “country” (*palatium* or *palation*); *fulk*, “ship” (*epholkion*); *quraysh*, “shark” (*karkharias*); *qinṭār*, “measure of weight” (*kentēnarion*).

The proper name *al-rūm*, “Byzantine Empire,” confirms what we already know, that the Arabs were aware of the great powers surrounding them. It is only the word *quraysh*, “shark,” which is traced to Greek, of course, not the Arab tribe Quraysh which bore that totemic name.

From Aramaic, often as the intermediary for other languages such as Hebrew, Persian, and Greek, as indicated below:

aḥbār, “learned doctors” (Heb.); *burūj*, “towers” (Gk.); *bunyān*, “building”; *tawwāb*, “the relenting one,” i.e., God (Akk.); *jund*, “army” (Pers.); *khinzīr*, “pig”; *sajada*, “to worship”; *sirbāl*, “garment” (Pers.); *saṭara*, “to write”; *sikkīn*, “knife”; *salām*, “peace” (Heb.); *silsila*, “chain”; *sunbul*, “ear of corn”; *shahr*, “month”; *ṣanam*, “idol”; *atīq*, “ancient”; *arūb*, “pleasing” (Heb.); *qaṣr*, “castle” (Gk. from Lat.); *kāhin*, “soothsayer” (Heb., but probably common Semitic); *kataba*, “to write” (Heb.); *masjid*, “place of worship” (borrowed independently of *sajada*); *miskīn*, “poor” (Akk.); *manfūsh*, “teased, carded (wool)” (Akk.); *nabī*, “prophet”; *qitt*, “judge’s decision”; *warda*, “rose” (Pers., or much older).

From Syriac, also an intermediary for other languages:

amshāj, “mingled” (plur., cf. *mizāj*); *buhtān*, “slander, calumny”; *biya*, “places of worship”; *jābiya*, “cistern”; *ḥiṣn*, “fortress”; *khaṭī’a*, “to sin, do wrong”; *khamr*, “wine”; *dīnār*, “gold coin” (Pers. from Gk.); *ribbiyyūn*, “myriads”; *raḥīq*, “strong [wine]”; *rizq*, “bounty” (Pers.); *zanjabīl*, “ginger” (Pers.); *zawj*, “[one of] a pair” (Gk.); *zayt*, “oil” (pre-Semitic); *sabbaḥa*, “to praise”; *sabīl*, “way”; *sultān*, “authority”; *sūq*, “street” (Akk.); *shī’a*, “sect, party”; *tīn*, “fig” (North Sem.); *fājir*, “wicked”; *fakḥkhār*, “clay” (a pre-Sumerian

origin has been claimed; Salonen 1952: 11); *firdaws*, “paradise” (Gk. from Pers.); *qudus*, “holiness” (North Sem.); *qaryya*, “village”; *qisṭās*, “balance, scale” (Gk.); *qissīs*, “priest”; *kāfūr*, “camphor” (Pers.); *kayl*, “measure”; *mizāj*, “tempering” (a variant of *amshāj*, “mingled,” see above); *nūn*, “fish”; *yāqūt*, “ruby.”

The Aramaic and the Syriac borrowings jointly testify to a long-standing cultural interaction: material terms are frequent, but it is the religious terms which now begin to stand out. Many other pre-Islamic words are attributed to Jewish or Christian sources, though not conclusively to either, including:

āya, “verse (of the Qurʾān)”; *janna*, “garden (of Eden)”; *ḥanān*, “grace”; *ḥikma*, “wisdom”; *khātam*, “seal” (also said to be from Egyptian; see Pennacchio 2011: §46 and references there); *rabb*, “lord, master”; *rujz*, “wrath”; *zabūr*, “the Psalter”; *zujāja*, “glass vessel”; *sāʿa*, “hour [of judgment]”; *sifr*, “book”; *saḥāra*, “scribes”; *ṣalaba*, “to crucify”; *ṣallā*, “to pray”; *ṣawm*, “fasting”; *ʿabd*, “servant (of God)”; *ālam*, “world, universe”; *ʿīd*, “festival”; *qurbān*, “sacrifice, offering”; *madīna*, “city”; *yaqīn*, “certain.”

The source of the word *allāh*, “god,” says Jeffery (1938: 66), “must be found in one of the older religions” (cf. Blau 1972: 175–7). Jeffery’s explanation of the unique vocative *allāhumma*, “O God,” can now be corrected. It was once thought to be connected with Hebrew *elohīm* (Jeffery 1938: 67, from Margoliouth); however, in Old North Arabian inscriptions (eighth century BCE to third century CE) the form *ʾlhm* occurs at the beginning of prayers, and this would seem to represent the same suffix as we find in *allāhumma* (EI2 2004: “Thamūdic”).

Contemporary Borrowings

These are words which are not attested before Islam and can best be explained as direct borrowings during the period of Muḥammad’s mission. There was intimate contact with other religious communities in the decades surrounding the Islamic revelation. Arabs mixed with Jews, with Christians of all kinds (including Ethiopians and Copts), and with Zoroastrians and others in Mesopotamia, and Muslim sources do not deny that Muḥammad may have received information from members of these religions, some of whom are personally identified (see Gilliot 2002).

Ethiopic and/or South Arabian:

aʿrāf, “al-Aʿrāf” (obscure proper name, but see Bellamy below); *āmana*, “to believe”; *injīl*, “the Gospel”; *burhān*, “proof”; *jahannam*, “hell”; *ḥawāriyyūn*, “disciples”; *raḥīm*, “stoned, cursed”; *ṣuwāʿ*, “drinking cup”; *fāṭir*, “creator”; *fath*, “judgment, decision”; *kibriyāʿ*, “glory”; *māʿida*, “table”; *mursā*, “harbor”; *munāfiq*, “hypocrite.”

Important religious terms are now making their appearance. The form *injīl* can only be accounted for by assuming that the Greek *euangelion* had passed through Ethiopic. The *hapax legomenon*, *ṣuwāʿ*, “drinking cup,” occurs in the Joseph story (*sūra* 12) and is

one of several Ethiopic borrowings in the same *sūra* (*burhān*, *fāṭir*, and the much earlier loan word, *qamīṣ*, “shirt”).

Persian:

barzakh, “barrier, partition.”

Greek:

ibīs, “the devil” (questionable: see below).

Aramaic:

ussisa, “was founded”; *bahīma*, “animal”; *tāba*, “to repent”; *tatbīr*, “destruction”; *darasa*, “to study” (Heb.); *zakkā*, “to purify”; *zakāt*, “alms”; *sabt*, “sabbath”; *ṭahara*, “to purify”; *ʿazzara*, “to help”; *minhāj*, “way” (Heb.); *nubuwwa*, “prophethood” (Heb.).

Syriac:

asbāt, “the tribes (of Israel)” (Heb.); *aslama*, “to devote oneself (to God)”; *baṭala*, “to be false”; *tajallā*, “to appear in glory”; *rabbānī*, “rabbi, teacher”; *sijill*, “seal” (Gk.); *suḥt*, “unlawful”; *sirāj*, “lamp” (Pers.); *salwā*, “quail”; *sūra*, “chapter of Qurʿān”; *sīmā*, “mark, sign” (Gk.); *shuhadāʿ*, “martyrs”; *ṣibgha*, “baptism” (but see Bellamy below); *ṭabaʿa*, “to seal” (but perhaps ultimately from Egyptian); *ṭūbā*, “good fortune”; *ṭūr*, “mountain”; *falaq*, “to split”; *qurʿān*, “recitation”; *qiyāma*, “resurrection”; *maʿīn*, “flowing water” (Heb.); *maqālīd*, “keys” (Gk.); *milla*, “religion”; *mann*, “manna.”

Uncertain (Jewish or Christian) and undated:

amr, “command, affair”; *sadaqa*, “alms”; *ʾadn*, “Eden”; *kafara*, “to atone”; *kursī*, “throne”; *malakūt*, “kingdom, dominion.”

By this stage the terminology of the Islamic revelation is approaching maturity, and to complete the process the vocabulary will be supplemented by neologisms created within Arabic itself.

New Meanings

Jeffery’s (1938: 39f.) third category comprises native roots which have acquired a new religious sense, for example, *nūr*, “light”; *rūḥ*, “spirit”; *umm*, “metropolis” (Q 6:92 *umm al-qurā*, “mother of the towns”); *nafs*, “soul”; *kalima*, “word” (= Jesus); *rasūl*, “messenger”; *yawm*, “day (of judgment),” and *sāʿa*, “hour (of judgment),” all of them attributed to Christian usage. *Mathal*, “parable,” may belong here, as the root is undoubtedly common Semitic, but the usage is biblical and Jeffery inclines to a Syriac inspiration. Jewish influence is credited for *zakāt*, “alms” (from a root denoting purity, unless Muḥammad himself

coined it, see below); *tahara*, “make clean”; *sakīna*, “the Shekina” (possibly mediated by Syriac); *siddīq*, “person of integrity”; it has also been suggested that *khalaqa*, “to create,” owes this sense to the Jewish usage of its Hebrew cognate (*EI2* 2004: “Khalk”). Perhaps *qibla*, “direction of prayer,” belongs here too, as it would surely have been associated with the Jewish practice of praying towards Jerusalem.

It should not be overlooked that the pagan vocabulary was also a source of terms, among them *hajja*, “to perform a pilgrimage” (it has cognates in the other religions, but is declared by Pennacchio 2011: 33 to be “a known loan word” which Jeffery missed); *tawāf*, “circumambulation of the Ka’ba” (the name of the Ka’ba is itself pre-Islamic); *ṣawm*, “fasting” (a native word according to Tritton 1939–42, against Jeffery 1938: 201 f.); *dhabaha*, “to sacrifice”; *dahr*, “time, eternity”; *ajal*, “term, predestined end”; *hasra*, “sorrow, regret”; and *ijāra/istijāra*, “giving or seeking protection,” all of them expressions of a pagan view of life which was absorbed into the Islamic paradigm.

The result was a fusion of vocabularies, pagan, Jewish, Christian, and new coinages, which eventually achieved recognition as technical terms, variously called *kalimāt islāmiyya ‘arabiyya*, “Arabic Islamic words” (al-Rāzī), *alfāz islāmiyya*, “Islamic expressions” (al-Suyūṭī 1972: I, 294–303 = *naw’* 20) or *asbāb islāmiyya*, “Islamic matters” (Ibn Fāris 1964: 78–80). Though not regarded as foreign by the Arabs, they do include words which Jeffery classed as loans, e.g., *mu’min*, “believer”; *munāfiq*, “hypocrite”; *kafara*, “to deny God”; *sujūd*, “prostrating in prayer”; *zakāt*, “alms,” etc., all of them used in senses previously unknown to the Arabs.

The religious vocabulary is now fully established, and the study of individual terms and concepts becomes part of the history of Islam rather than of Arabic. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine particular words any further, but some outstanding articles will be mentioned. Faris and Glidden’s essay on *ḥanīf*, “primitive monotheist” (1939), remains a model of detailed historical investigation, and is now counterbalanced by Rippin’s (1991) warning against over-interpreting the early manifestations of Arab monotheism. *Dīn*, “religion,” has a very complex history, and Waardenburg’s nuanced account (1981) of its meanings throughout the period of revelation can be applied to other terms, among them *Islam* itself (cf. Baneth 1971). O’Shaughnessy (1961) sheds light on the evolution of religious terminology in his review of the words for “hell” in their approximate chronological order. Four are natives: *sa’īr* (eighteen times), *ḥuṭama* (Q 104:4, 5, evidently a bold new metaphor), *hāwīya* (Q 101:9), and *laḏā* (Q 92:14), and three are loan words: *jahannam* (seventy-seven times), *saqar* (Q 54:48, 74:26, 27, 42), and *jaḥīm* (twenty-six times), though Zammit (2002: 595) disagrees on this last. Finally, Denny’s (1977) study of a cluster of key Islamic terms includes several of the neologisms mentioned above, reminding us that they should not be taken in isolation.

Proper Names and Problem Words

Proper names (Zammit 2002: 55 counts sixty-six of them) are difficult, especially the biblical ones. Their Arabic forms can make it impossible to determine whether the name came directly from the Bible or via Jewish or Christian oral sources, or even what the

original might have been in the first place. The name of Gabriel appears in eleven different forms; others, such as *Āzar* and *Aṣḥāb al-Rass*, have never been satisfactorily explained.

Arab personal names need little discussion, for example *Abū Lahab* (Q 111:1), *Aḥmad* (Q 61:6, though not necessarily a name here), *Muḥammad* (Q 3:144, 33:40, 47:2, 48:29), and the legendary *Luqmān* (Q 31). There are some historical, but no formal problems with the names of the “Arab” prophets *Hūd* (also a collective term for Jews, see below), *Ṣāliḥ* (a rare name before Islam and possibly a coinage of Muḥammad’s time, *EI2* 2004: “*Ṣāliḥ*”), and *Shu‘ayb* (see below) and their tribes ‘*Ād* and *Thamūd*. The same is true of the compound names with *dhū*, e.g., *Dhū ‘l-Nūn* (Q 21:87, i.e., *Jonah*, with *nūn*, “fish,” an early borrowing from Syriac), *Dhū ‘l-Ayd* (*David*, Q 38:17), *Dhū ‘l-Awtād* (*Pharaoh*, 38:12), *Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn* (*Alexander the Great*, Q 18:83), and *Dhū ‘l-Kifl* (Q 21:85, 38:48), this last respelled by Bellamy (1996: 199) as *Dhū ‘l-Ṭifl* to give “the man with the child”; for other interpretations, e.g., “*Job*,” see *EI2* 2004: “*Dhū ‘l-Kifl*.”

A chronological classification of proper names is not very informative, as only a few of them can be reliably considered pre-Islamic, namely:

yahūd, “*Jews*” (S. Arabian); *ādam*, “*Adam*” (Heb.); *shi‘rā*, “*Dog Star*” (Gk. *Seirios*); *majūs*, “*Magians*” (Pers. or Syr.); and (all via Syriac) *isrā‘īl*, “*Israel*”; *ilyās*, “*Elijah*”; *jibrā‘īl*, “*Gabriel*”; *zakariyyā*, “*Zachariah*”; *sulaymān*, “*Solomon*”; *al-masīḥ*, “*Messiah*”; *nūḥ*, “*Noah*”; *hārūn*, “*Aaron*”; *yājūj*, *mājūj*, “*Gog, Magog*”; *yūnus*, “*Jonah*.”

The following are dated to Muḥammad’s time.

Hebrew or Aramaic:

jālūt, “*Goliath*” (Heb.); *dāwūd*, “*David*” (Heb.); *hāmān*, “*Haman*”; *yūsuf*, “*Joseph*.”

Syriac:

ibrāhīm, “*Abraham*” (by analogy with *ismā‘īl*, *isrā‘īl*); *ismā‘īl*, “*Ishmael*”; *alyasa‘*, “*Elisha*”; *ayyūb*, “*Job*”; *fir‘awn*, “*Pharaoh*” (if not Eth.); *lūṭ*, “*Lot*”; *mālik*, “*Moloch*”; *maryam*, “*Mary*”; *mūsā*, “*Moses*”; *mīkāl*, “*Michael*”; *naṣārā*, “*Christians*”; *yaḥyā*, “*John [the Baptist]*”; *ya‘qūb*, “*Jacob*.”

Greek:

iblīs, “*devil*,” see below.

Obscure or disputed names (see further below):

āzar, “*Āzar*”; *jibt* and *ṭāghūt*, understood as two idols; *al-sāmīrī*, “*the Samaritan*” (Aram. or Syr.); *al-ṣābi‘ūn*, “*the Sabians*”; *ṭālūt*, “*Saul*”; *‘uzayr*, “*Ezra*”; *‘imrān*, the father of *Moses*; *‘īsā*, “*Jesus*”; *qārūn*, “*Korah*”; *hārūt wa-mārūt*, names of two fallen angels; *yaghūth*, the idol “*Yaghūth*” (Eth. or S. Arabian).

Place names (cf. Neuwirth 2002) are infrequent; there are a few pre-Islamic Arab names, such as al-Ḥijr (Q 15:80), Mecca (Q 48:24, alternative name Bakka, Q 3:96), al-Ka'ba (Q 5:95, 97), *al-bayt al-ḥarām* (Q 5:97), “the sacred house,” *al-bayt al-ʿatīq*, “the ancient house” (Q 22:29, 33, with *ʿatīq* a loan from Aramaic).

Ancient names:

bābil, “Babel” (Akk.); *furāt* (Q 25:55, 35:13, 77:27), “sweet river water” from the Akk. name of the Euphrates.

Others:

iram, “Iram” (S. Arab.); *al-rūm*, “the Byzantine Empire” (Gk.), *sabaʿ*, “Sheba” (S. Arabian); *ṭūr saynāʿ*, “Mt. Sinai” (Syr.); *madyan*, “Midian” (Syr.); *miṣr*, “Egypt” (S. Arabian, and see *EI2* 2004: “Miṣr, B” for additional information on its general sense and Semitic background).

Obscure:

tasnīm, *jūdī*, *al-raqīm*, see below.

It is evident that there are no personal names from Ethiopia or South Arabia except the Yemeni royal title *tubbaʿ* (and perhaps *firʿawn*, “Pharaoh,” though the Joseph story, which probably came from an Ethiopian source, curiously does not mention the name *firʿawn*). Only a handful of divine epithets are listed as borrowings by Jeffery (1938; e.g., *tawwāb*, *rabb*, *rahmān*, *fāṭir*, *qayyūm*, *muṣawwir*, *mālik*, *muhaymin*), and Moubarac’s extensive collection (1955) of the names of God should be consulted for the many expressions common to the Qurʾān and the divinities of South Arabia, pagan and otherwise.

Forms implying a Christian source do appear to predominate, but Jeffery is sometimes rather arbitrary, and there may well be a contrary opinion buried in a footnote.

The unfamiliar form of a number of biblical names is a problem for both Muslim and Western scholars, and the latter have not shrunk from offering psychological explanations. Dvořák (1885: 17; reported in Jeffery 1938: 39, n. 1) was of the opinion that Muḥammad was deliberately trying to bamboozle his listeners with strange and mysterious words. This we can ignore, but we do have to accept that names may have been distorted by misunderstandings in the transmission or a pressure to make them conform to preferred native patterns, and there is always a possibility of textual corruption.

Textual corruption is significant because the proposed emendations may produce a word which ceases to be a borrowing and should then be withdrawn from Jeffery’s list, e.g., *al-raqīm* (Q 18:8) = *al-ruqūd*, “sleeping,” hence no longer an obscure place name (Bellamy 1991; Luxenberg 2007: 80f., 84, reads *al-ruqād*, “sleep”). Bellamy (1993)

also proposes that *abb* (Q 80:31) = *lubb*, “kernel, i.e., nuts”; *al-aʿrāf* (Q 7:44, 46) = *al-ajrāf*, “banks of a wadi” or *al-aḥrāf*, “mountain ledges” (see also below); *ḥiṭṭa* (Q 2:55, 7:161) = *khiṭṭa*, from *khiṭʿa*, “sin”; *sijill* (Q 21:104) = *musajjil* or *musjil*, “one who registers”; *ṣibghat allāh* (Q 2:132) = *ṣanīʿat allāh*, “the favor of God” or *kifāyat allāh*, “the sufficiency of God”; *sabʿan min al-mathānī* (Q 15:87) = *shayʿan min al-matāli*, “some recitations”; *jibt* (Q 4:54) = *jinnat*, “jinn” (Bellamy 2001, and see further below); *ṭuwan* (Q 20:12), an unanalyzable place name, is simply *ṭawā*, “it rolled,” used descriptively along the same lines as *Gilgāl* (Joshua 5:9) for a place which “rolls,” Hebrew *glgl* (Bellamy 2001).

The name *āzar* (Q 6:74) has never been explained, but for Bellamy (1996) it is simply a misreading of *izrāʿan*, “contemptuously”; *idrīs* (Q 19:57, 21:85) has also defied identification (to confuse matters it appears as a variant of *Ilyās*; see Paret 1993–6: Nachträge 552 to p. 418), but Bellamy (1996) lumps it together with two other enigmatic names, *ʿuzayr* (Q 9:30) and [*aṣḥāb*] *al-rass* (Q 25:37, 38; 50:12), and makes them all corruptions of Esdras; *shuʿayb* (Q 26:177) = *Shaʿyā*, “Isaiah” (Bellamy 1996, hence no longer the “Arab” prophet *Shuʿayb*); *ʿīsā* (frequent), “Jesus” is a misreading of *al-masīh*. (Bellamy 2002, revoking an earlier explanation of his, 2001, that it was a corruption of *masiyyā* representing the Greek *Messias*).

At least since Nöldeke (1910: 23–30) there has been a readiness to assume that some obscure words were errors or arbitrary creations by Muḥammad. The following are some of the explanations offered, including foreign words which have been radically transformed, and possible coinages from native resources: *al-aʿrāf* (Q 44:46), name of a wall separating paradise from hell, is a misunderstanding by Muḥammad (Jeffery 1938: 65, but see Bellamy’s emendations above); *jūdī* (Q 11:46), the mountain where the Ark rested, is so called from Muḥammad’s mistaken belief that Noah was an inhabitant of Arabia, where a Mt. *Jūdī* exists; *zukhruf* (Q 6:112; 10:25; 17:95; 43:34), “something highly embellished,” seemed to Jeffery (1938: 150) to be “a deformation from the Syr. *zkhūrīthā*,” connected with necromancy; *furqān* (Q 2:50, 181; 3:2; 8:29, 42; 21:49; 25:1), “discrimination,” is “probably a coining of Muḥammad himself” (Fleischer *apud* Jeffery 1938: 226). The connection of *iblis* (eleven times), “devil,” with Greek *diabolos* is still far from conclusive, but has yet to be improved on: Künstlinger (1928) (reported by Jeffery 1938: 48, n. 3), “proposes the somewhat far-fetched theory that *Iblīs* is derived from the Jewish *Belial* by deliberate transformation.” *ʿIlliyyūn* (Q 83:18, 19), “upper heavens,” is seen as a misunderstanding of Heb. *ʿelyōn*, “the highest” (*EI2* 2004: “*ʿIlliyyūn*,” but see also above for a Syriac etymology from *Margoliouth*).

Other obscure words that Muḥammad is said to have coined are *ghassāq* (Q 38:57; 78:25), “purulent?”; *tasnīm* (Q 83:27), glossed as the name of a fountain in paradise; and *salsabīl* (Q 76:18), supposedly the name of a river in paradise (Jeffery 1938: 39, from Nöldeke, who has, however, *ghislīn* (Q 69:36), “purulent?,” as another unexplained Qurʾānic word). Nöldeke is in good company: Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209; 1957–8: I, 134f.) mentions *tasnīm*, *salsabīl*, *ghislīn*, *sijjīn*, *al-raqīm*, “and others” (!) as words introduced by Muḥammad and “unknown to the Arabs and other nations.”

When Muḥammad uses the Aramaic pattern *tabār* (Q 71:28), “destruction,” in preference to the native verbal noun pattern *tabīr* of the newly Arabicized root *tabbara*, “to destroy” (Q 17:7; 25:41), he may deliberately have chosen it to influence his Jewish listeners (Schall 1984–6: 372). Compare this with Künstlinger (1928–30) on *rāʾinā* (Q 2:98; 4:48): it is the echo of a Jewish mealtime prayer *rāʾēnū*, “pasture us,” addressed to a God who is thought of as a shepherd, an idea which Künstlinger shows was repugnant to Muslims and therefore, in his interpretation, was intended to have a negative effect here (other theories in Jeffery 1938: 136). Perhaps we may include here the denominative *hāda*, “to be Jewish” (Q 2:59; 4:48), and the collective *hūd*, “Jews” (Q 2:105, 129, 134; it is also the name of the “Arab” prophet Hūd), from the Aramaic loan *yahūd*, “Jews,” as they seem to involve a play on *hāda*, used eleven times elsewhere in its native sense of “to repent.”

Conspicuous in the Qurʾān are the rhyming pairs Hārūt and Mārūt (Q 2:96) and Yājūj and Mājūj (Q 18:93; 21:96). It has been conjectured, with some plausibility, that other names have been formed on a similar principle, so Ibrāhīm, “Abraham,” is modeled on Ismāʿīl and Isrāʿīl, Qārūn on Hārūn, and perhaps Iblīs and Idrīs are echoes of each other. Whether Ṭālūt (Q 2:248, 259), the name of Saul, is a conscious echo of Jālūt, “Goliath,” will never be known. Margoliouth (1939: 61) links Mārūt with Ethiopic *mārīt*, glossed as *divina, fatidica*, with the *ī* converted to *ū* in keeping with the Qurʾānic preference for words ending in *-ūt*, no doubt influenced by such forms as *malakūt* (Q 6:75; 7:184; 23:90; 36:83), “kingdom, dominion,” borrowed from Aramaic or Syriac.

Ṭāghūt, an unexplained name paired with *jibt* (Q 4:54), probably belongs here. If we accept Bellamy’s proposition (2001) that *jibt* is simply a misspelt *jinnat*, “jinn,” then half the problem disappears, but he says nothing about *ṭāghūt*. The latter is from Ethiopic *ṭāʾōt*, “idols,” according to Jeffery (1938), but Atallah (1970) takes *jibt* and *ṭāghūt* together as meaning “Egyptian” (cf. “gypsy,” hence a sorcerer) and “Thoth,” lord of magic and wisdom, i.e., some kind of magician. Some years earlier Köbert (1961b: 415–16) had suggested that *ṭāghūt* might be connected with the Syriac root *ṭ-ʿ-y* “to wander,” which renders the Greek *planētēs*, “wandering stars,” hence denoting some sort of planet god, but a link with the Aramaic/Syriac root *ṭ-ʿ-w* “to lead astray” cannot be ruled out. In either case *jibt* is left unaccounted for.

Sometimes the ending of a word seems to have been modified in order to create a rhyme at the end of a Qurʾānic verse, for example *sīnīn* for *saynāʾ*, “Sinai,” in Q 95:2, *ghislīn* (of no clear meaning, see above) in Q 69:36, and *sijjīn* in Q 83, 7, 8 (of no clear meaning, see further below). One *sūra* (Q 37) contains several specimens: *jaḥīm* (vv. 23, 55, 64, 68, 97, 163, and in other *sūras*), “hell,” an arbitrary distortion of *jahannam* (O’Shaughnessy 1961: 452), *Il-Yāsīn* (v. 130) for the name Ilyās, *yaqṭīn* (v. 146), “gourd,” garbled Hebrew, according to Jeffery, and in the same *sūra* we also find *jabīn* (v. 103), not itself a foreign word, but so obscure that Jeffery assumes that it must be: it is traditionally glossed as “forehead,” but is now explained as “hill” (Calder 1986: 25). Such games with words were a feature of *rajaz* poetry, which may have evolved from the pre-metrical rhyming prose favored by the soothsayers for their oracular pronouncements and which appears in the rhyming structure of the Qurʾānic *sūras*.

One final example will illustrate how the foreign vocabulary of the Qurʾān still challenges our philological ingenuity, namely the trio *sijill* (Q 20:104), usually treated as having something to do with documents, *sijīl* (Q 11:82; 15:74; 105:4), thought to refer to lumps of hard clay, and *sijjīn* (Q 83:7, 8), connected with writing, or else an attribute or name of hell. Of these three only *sijill* is relatively securely derived (perhaps directly) from Greek *sigill[on]*, “an imperial edict,” hence “seal.” The accepted etymology for *sijīl* used to be the Persian *sang + gil*, “stone + clay” (Jeffery 1938: 164) until it was replaced by Leemhuis’ theory (1982) that *sijīl* is related to the Aramaic *sgyl*, “smooth altar stone,” giving the sense of “stones of flint” for *ḥijāratan min sijīl* (Q 11:82 etc.). The third word, *sijjīn*, has defied explanation, and Nöldeke (1910: 28) decided it must have been invented by Muḥammad, perhaps for the sake of the rhyme, as it is accompanied by what looks like a gloss: *kitāb marqūm*, “a written book” (*marqūm* is also a problem, and may mean “dotted,” as some Semitic scripts are). In Margoliouth’s amendments (1939: 58) to Jeffery, *sijjīn* is said to be simply a variant of a word borrowed from the Syriac *sīgīliyon*, “seal, diploma,” itself from the Greek *sigill[on]*, the alternation of word-final *l* and *n* being well attested, as in *jibrīl/jibrīn*, “Gabriel,” *ismāʾīl/ismāʾīn*, “Ismāʾīl.”

However, all this is now rejected by de Blois (1999: 62, n. 6 with acknowledgments to Sima), who has reinstated the Persian etymology for *sijīl* but in an older form, now *sag + gil*, with an adjectival derivative *sagēn*, “of stone,” which accounts for *sijjīn* as well, eliminating not only Nöldeke, al-Rāzī, and Margoliouth but also O’Shaughnessy (1961: 444), who thought *sijjīn* could be cognate with *sijn*, “prison,” and “might possibly refer to a place of eternal imprisonment.” De Blois goes further, and invokes a god of Hatra named *shnjl* in his conjecture that *ḥijāratan min sijīl*, usually construed as explanatory, “stones consisting of hard clay,” echoes a biblical formula in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Genesis 19:24) and really means “stones from a supernatural being called *Sijjīl*.” This was no longer understood, and so the similar sounding word *sijill* was brought into play: its association with edicts and seals led naturally to the assumption that it was connected with clay and writing, and on these grounds the meaning of “clay” was assigned to the mysterious *sijīl*, and of “writing” to *sijjīn*.

This is an unusually complex reconstruction, which is cited here at some length because it seems just as convincing as Leemhuis’ once did, and as Margoliouth’s and Jeffery’s explanations did before him.

Conclusion

The picture is one of confusion on both sides. Muslims were (and are still) faced with the task of reconciling the declared Arabness of the revelation with the presence of non-Arabic words in the Qurʾān, while Western scholars continue to disagree about the origins of many of these words and the historical implications for Islam, with both medieval Muslim and modern Western exegesis running parallel, each driven by its own sectarian and cultural preconceptions. Few however go as far as Mahdihassan (1953), who claimed that several Qurʾānic words are derived from Chinese, for example *kursī*, “throne.”

This chapter takes no position on the alleged debt of Islam to earlier religions which has been inferred from these foreign words, and the striking overlap in biblical and Qurʾānic content is left for others to interpret. Kronholm’s laconically objective review of 150 years of scholarship on this theme (1982–3) is recommended as the best coverage of this battleground of conflicting, not to say irreconcilable opinions. We should bear in mind that the traffic was in both directions. The Akkadian *anāqāte*, “female camels,” has been explained as a borrowing from Arabic *nāqa*, and Beeston (1994) lists *masjid*, “place of worship” and now “mosque,” as an Old South Arabian loan word from Arabic. Moreover the Arabs are present both ethnically and linguistically throughout the Bible.

We remain dependent on Jeffery, and the data will continue to support all kinds of interpretations, of which the most extreme is currently that of Luxenberg (2007: 327), that the Arabic of the Qurʾān “must have been an Aramaic–Arabic hybrid language,” a view which has found its supporters. The most eirenic and impartial verdict is that of Kronholm (1982–3: 65), who concludes that the terminological precedents and borrowings perceived by Western scholars in the emergence of Islam “are not to be interpreted as tokens of a spiritual dependence. Rather they are employed and transformed by Muhammad into obedient servants of his prophetic originality.”

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CHAPTER 9

Structure and the Emergence of Community

Angelika Neuwirth

Three Self-designations of the Qurʾān: *Muṣḥaf*–*Qurʾān*–*Kitāb*

Qurʾānic scholarship over the last decades has generally focused on the Qurʾānic text as transmitted to readers in the canonized codex, the *muṣḥaf*, rather than exploring its oral “prehistory,” the sequence of messages pronounced by the prophet Muḥammad in the process of his addressing his emerging community. The primary scholarly concern was and remains with the codified text in its given literary shape, not with the Qurʾān as a collection of prophetic communications that document the emergence of a community and thus, for their full understanding, need to be rearranged chronologically.

This preference of the *textus receptus* was not least due to a justified desire to overcome the earlier prevailing philological-historical search for the older layers of the text that was pursued with almost total disinterest in its final shape. John Wansbrough (1977), to whom the shift of focus from textual history to form history is substantially due, was to induce a veritable revolution in reading the Qurʾān. Wansbrough also radically revised and redefined the relationship between the Qurʾānic text and the Islamic grand narrative about its origins as presented in the biography of the prophet, the historicity of which had until then all too readily been accepted. Wansbrough’s *Quranic Studies* (1977), which demanded a wholesale dismissal of the factual data of Islamic tradition, caused, however, the Qurʾānic text as a literary artifact, and thus a source for the earliest history of Islam, to be swept aside, along with the rest of the traditional narrative. The verdict is, as al-Azmeh (2014b) shows, hyper-skeptical. His claim that the Qurʾān must have originated from a later period and a different cultural

milieu than traditionally assumed violently rid the Qurʾānic text of its historical coordinates, thus disqualifying it as a subject of historical investigation.

It is not overly surprising that this approach that projected the Qurʾān into a totally new chronological (eighth century, not seventh) and geographical (Fertile Crescent, not Arabia) framework, ascribing the Qurʾānic text to anonymous compilers from a monotheist sectarian background, had the result of discouraging microstructural literary research in the Qurʾānic text for several decades. Approaching the problem from a historical vantage point, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (1977) supported Wansbrough's revision of the traditional image of early Islam. Basing their discussion on non-Arabic writings, they excluded not only Arabic-Islamic sources from their material, but also, and paradoxically, the major object of investigation, the Qurʾānic text itself, whose origins they projected into yet another temporal and spatial framework. Earlier, speculations about a Christian original underlying the Qurʾān had been presented by Günter Lüling (1974, 2003), who was followed by Christoph Luxenberg (2000), both of whom argued for an overall revision of our understanding of the Qurʾān, proposing radical emendations of selected text units without, however, ever submitting the Qurʾān *in toto* to a microstructural reading. Meanwhile, evidence of old Qurʾān codices (see Puin 1996 and Déroche 2014) as well as new philological (De Blois 2002) and historical (Ammann 2001, Donner 1998; Dostal 1991; Krone 1992; al-Azmeh 2014a,b) studies have provided strong arguments in favor of the Qurʾān's emergence from an Arabian environment and of an early date of the Qurʾānic redaction, thus advocating for the fixation of the text in the shape transmitted to us.

On the basis of our current knowledge about the transmission process (Böwering 2001) and about the spectrum of rivaling text traditions (Jeffery 1937; Leemhuis 2001), the most plausible hypothesis is that the texts assembled in the transmitted Qurʾānic corpus do reflect the wording of communications that were actually pronounced by Muḥammad, though we have no decisive evidence as to the exact phonetic shape of the language spoken by sedentary communities at the time (Vollers 1906).

Whereas Qurʾānic stylistics from a grammatical point of view have been the object of several studies (Nöldeke 1910: 1–30; Bloch 1946; Neuwirth 1981), the impact of Qurʾānic narration on its listeners and readers has only been investigated recently (Kermani 2000). This chapter is not intended to describe Qurʾānic techniques of narration extensively, but to give an overview of major Qurʾānic sub-genres and their communicational function in the process of the emergence of the earliest community (Neuwirth 2014b). We will first attempt to contrast the dramatic structure of the Qurʾānic communication (*qurʾān*) with the static character of the canonized text (*muṣṣḥaf*), starting with a description of the *muṣṣḥaf*. Subsequently, the literary character of the early and later Meccan *sūras* and finally the Medinan *sūras* will be discussed.

A critical remark is in place here: The option for the *muṣṣḥaf* as a vantage point is not only historically questionable, since the *muṣṣḥaf* mirrors a later development (Neuwirth and Sells 2016), it equally reflects an amazing disinterest in the Qurʾān's late antique setting (Neuwirth 2010b). The Qurʾān evidently is not an auctorial work but the transcript of long running debates, such as were characteristic of the era of late antiquity. We should not read "late antiquity" in the sense of a politically determined epoch – whose

delimitations would be controversial – but rather as an epistemic space, a *Denkraum* (Schmidt, Schmid, and Neuwirth 2016), where particular textual practices were employed by diverse communities. These practices are partially techniques of debate, rhetorical devices, and partly ideologically new re-readings of earlier traditions which are translated from particularistic statements into universal ones, or from tribally informed texts into appeals to the pious individual. It is the initiative of re-reading and debating earlier traditions, be they biblical, Hellenic, or – in the Qur’ānic case – even pagan Arab, that connects the Qur’ān to the founding documents of the neighboring religions such as the Talmud or the Syriac hymns. This procedure of re-reading and debating in the Qur’ānic case is to be imagined as an oral practice which necessarily produced texts permanently open to revision, such as are documented in the so-called “later additions,” see below, not a premeditated written composition.

Structure of the Codex: Shape

The Qur’ānic text transmitted to us (E12 2004: “Ḳur’ān”; for the history of the text see Nöldeke 1909–38) betrays a peculiar composition, essentially different than that of the Hebrew Bible, which pursues salvation history through a roughly chronological sequence of events, and equally different from the Gospels, which narrate the essential stages of the founding history of the Christian faith. It does not present a continuous narrative of the past, but in its early texts conjures the future, the imminent judgment day, before entering into a debate with various interlocutors about the implementation of monotheist religious ideas in the present. In terms of form, the Qur’ān is not a coherent book either – one for instance made up of sub-units that build on each other – but is rather a collection of 114 independent text units, *sūras* (*sūra*; plural *suwar*) with no evident external link to each other. A *sūra* is marked by a headline giving its name, and by an introductory invocation, the so-called *basmala*, that is, the formula *bismi ‘llāh al-rahīmān al-rahīm* (“In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful”). The term *sūra* goes back to Qur’ānic use, though originally referring to undetermined text units, smaller than the eventually fixed *sūras* (the origin of the term is obscure; see Jeffery 1938). Whereas the names of the *sūras* in some cases are controversial, several *sūras* being known under more than one name, the introductory formula most probably stems from the recitation practice of the prophet’s community itself. The *sūras* vary in length from two-sentence miniature statements to lengthy polythematic communications. They are arranged in the corpus roughly according to their length: the longest *sūras* are placed first, the shorter ones following in a generally descending order. The vast majority of the *sūras* are neatly composed texts that may be viewed as constituting their own literary genre, as will be explored below. Although a great number of *sūras* appear to have been extended through later additions in the course of their oral communication, in their complemented version they still seem to follow particular rules of composition (Neuwirth 1981, 2014b). Only some of the long *sūras* appear as later compilations assembled from isolated text passages; their final shape may be due to the redaction process itself.

It is the shape of the *sūras* that provides the most relevant clues for the establishment of a chronology. The *sūras* not only debate questions that increase in discursive breadth and theological depth, they also develop in terms of their verse length and verse structure, and the complexity of their syntax. Reservations against a diachronic reading of the Qurʾān are often related to the allegation that such a reading presupposes a strictly linear development. What is however evinced from a diachronic reading is rather a zig-zag movement: though texts develop out of each other, the later presupposing the earlier, they frequently refer back to earlier communicated messages, commenting on them and adjusting them to more recently attained insights. So-called “later additions” have been identified in the cases of almost half of the Meccan *sūras* (Neuwirth 2011); the Medinan *sūras* seem to reflect even less linear growth altogether. There is no claim to a purely linear development connected with the diachronic reading of the Qurʾān then.

Sūras are composed of verses (*āya*; plural *āyāt*), varying in size from one single word to an entire, complex segment. The term *āya*, which corresponds to Syriac *āthā* and Hebrew *ōth* and means a “visible sign of a transcendental reality,” is first used in the Qurʾān to denote signs of divine omnipotence, such as are manifest in nature or in history. The notion developed in the course of the communication process to designate a miraculous sign apt to prove the truth of the prophetic message and was, eventually, conferred on the Qurʾānic verse. The marking of verse endings goes back to early traditions (Spitaler 1935). The early short *sūras*, assembled in the last section of the codex, are styled in a kind of rhymed prose, labeled *sajʿ* in Arabic philological theory, known as the medium of the ancient Arabian soothsayers (*kahana*; singular *kāhin*). It is a particularly succinct rhythmic diction where single phrases are marked by prose-rhyme, *fāṣila*. This pattern of phonetic correspondence between the verse endings is at once more loose than poetic rhyme (*qāfiya*) and more flexible, and thus allows semantically related verses to be bracketed by a rhyme of their own and mark off clearly distinct verse groups.

The highly sophisticated phonetic structures produced by this style have been evaluated in the work of Michael Sells (1990, 1993). Though the *sajʿ* style will give way at a later stage of development to a more smoothly flowing prose allowing for complex segments to form a single verse, closed by only a phonetically stereotypical rhyming syllable, the unit of the verse as the smallest compositional entity is an essential element of Qurʾānic literary structure. It not only facilitates the act of memorizing but also constitutes the backbone of Qurʾānic recitation or chant (*tartīl*, *tajwīd*; see Nelson 1985), that is the essential self-manifestation of the Muslim scripture. The numbering of Qurʾānic verses is a modern phenomenon, whereas other technical subdivisions, like that dividing the entire text into seven *manāzil* (singular *manzila*, “station”), or into thirty *ajzāʾ* (singular *juzʿ*, “part”), which in turn are divided into two *aḥzāb* (singular *ḥizb*, “part”) that are merely governed by quantitative criteria without concern for the rhetorical and semantic disposition of the *sūras*, stem from the early post-redactional period and were introduced to facilitate memorizing and reciting (for the early codices, see Jeffery 1937; Leemhuis 2001).

The sequence of the Qurʾānic *sūras*, which – with minor exceptions, see Dayeh (2010) – as a rule does not follow any logical, let alone theological guideline, betrays at once a conservative and a theologically disinterested attitude on the side of the redactors.

It suggests that the redaction was carried out in an extremely cautious way, without elaborate planning, perhaps in a hurry, at a stage of development prior to the emergence of the elaborate prophetic conceptions underlying the *sīra*, the biography of Muḥammad, which was fixed around 150 AH. Furthermore, the stabilization of the text must have occurred before the great conquests, since a unification of various textual traditions dispersed over the ever-extending territories would have been difficult to implement (Donner 1998). The traditional scenario of the ʿUthmānic redaction, the hypothesis that the texts of the prophet’s recitations were collected and published some twenty-five years after his death by the third caliph ʿUthmān to form the corpus we have before us, is thus not entirely implausible – the ascription of the first official publication of the Qurʾān to the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) whose contribution to the Masoretic fixation of the text is well documented (Hamdan 2006) seems to be an overcautious hypothesis (De Prémare 2005).

Place, Time, and Agents of the *Muṣḥaf*

The *muṣḥaf*, being the fixed corpus, is addressed to the believers in general and is meant to be read as well as recited. Its due place is the learned circle of religious specialists, *ʿulamāʾ*, where it constitutes the basis of religious learning. Since in traditional Islam Qurʾān reading in communal (and private) worship is a recital by heart, the *muṣḥaf*’s place physically spoken is not primarily the cultic space of the mosque. Nor is the use of the *muṣḥaf* as such bound to particular sacred time periods of the day; it is unrelated to the five binding ritual prayers that demand Qurʾānic recitations performed without textual support. Aside from its purpose as a source of learning, the *muṣḥaf* is, of course, primarily a scripture, that is, a codex endowed with the symbolic power of creating social coherence and the identity of its community (Neuwirth 2010b), the agents involved in the communication of the *muṣḥaf* being the readers over the ages (for the implications of canonicity, see Assmann and Assmann 1987).

As a product of its particular time, however, the *muṣḥaf* addresses the expectations hedged in the community about the shape of a scripture in late antiquity, a highly dignified corpus of the word of God that, of course, should have a particularly expressive beginning and end. Indeed, one realizes that the Qurʾān is embedded in a ceremonial framework clearly marked as such: the introductory text, *al-fātiḥa*, “the opening,” is an exceptional text, not a *sūra* in the strict sense, not being speech conferred by God on man, but a prayer to be uttered by the community, indeed the central common prayer of Islam, comparable to the Christian “Our Father” (Neuwirth and Neuwirth 1991).

The *fātiḥa* in the beginning of the Qurʾānic corpus serves as a prayer for the divine blessing required to protect the sacred book. Analogically, the two final apotropaic *sūras*, *al-muʾawwidhatān*, “the two by which one seeks refuge,” though formally introduced by a divine command *qul*, “speak (the following text)” and thus featuring as divine speech, are equally formulae that substantially belong to humans. Invoking divine protection, these *sūras* are apotropaic texts to shield the Qurʾān from the intervention of demons. Thus, the positioning of *sūras* 1, 113, and 114 – texts that are missing from the Qurʾānic text

collections preceding the canonical edition, presumably not being acknowledged as *sūras* (see Jeffery 1937) – obviously goes back to concepts developed by the redactors of the so-called Uthmānic text, who were charged with the task to construct a *textus ne varietur*, a codex with a claim to canonicity. It is no coincidence that the apotropaic formula to be used before starting Qurʾān recitation – *aʿūdhu bi-ʾllāh min al-shayṭān al-raǧīm* (“I take refuge to God from Satan, the cursed”) – is reflective of the two final *sūras*.

Once one separates these framing parts from the text embedded in them, a text emerges that starts (Q 2:2) with identifying itself with “the scripture” dedicated to those readers who, as believers and practitioners of the basic religious duties of Islam, are obviously Muslims: *dhālika l-kitābu*, “That is the scripture – no doubt about it – a guide to the pious, who have faith in the unseen and are steadfast in prayer: who bestow in charity a part of what We give them: who trust in what has been revealed to you and to others before you, and firmly believe in the life to come.” The text of the Qurʾānic codex ends with the perhaps most frequently recited Islamic confession of faith, which emphatically pronounces the focal truth of Islam, the oneness of God: *Qul: huwa ʾllāhu aḥad*, “Speak: God is one, the eternal God, He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him” (Q 112:1–4; see Neuwirth 2010b). These arrangements of texts are signs sent by the redactors to the readers of the codex, who are identified indirectly by their religious duties (Q 2:2–3) and directly by their belief in the oneness of God (Q 112:1–4).

The term *muṣḥaf* (“codex”) itself is not Qurʾānic, since it is the receptacle of a scripture that did not yet exist throughout the Qurʾānic communication process. The Qurʾān became “the scripture, in the sense of a book” only after the death of Muḥammad, when the divine voice was no longer to be heard. Only then could the form of the – until then virtual – book, a transcendent text communicated in excerpts to the community, be imagined as a real, clearly defined corpus. What is comprised in the *muṣḥaf* is “the scripture” in its new understanding as the legacy of its transmitter; *kitāb* after the end of the process of revelation no longer designates the virtual, heavenly scripture – originally referred to by *kitāb* in verses like Q 2:2 – with its diverse earthly manifestations, but the real book *katʾ exochen*, the Muslim scripture.

The *muṣḥaf*, then, is the reified *kitāb*, whose codification follows particular rules. At later stages it therefore identifies itself on its interior cover page as being made up of historically different layers, the oldest being the *rasm ʾuthmānī* (the graphic skeleton of consonantal signs that are claimed to go back to the Uthmānic redaction itself), followed by the vocalizing strokes as well as the points added to consonants to distinguish their diverse phonetic realizations – additional signs inserted systematically only some decades later (Leemhuis 2001).

These attempts at unification and at making the text unambiguous, however, never achieved a total communal consensus, but rather resulted in a diversity of traditions concerning the reading and thus the understanding of particular words, though without causing (as far as we can judge from the remnants) theologically relevant divergences. These traditions, *riwāyāt*, also used to be documented on the interior cover page of the *muṣḥaf*, where the reader usually will find the wording *bi-l-rasm al-ʾUthmānī bi-riwāyat Ḥaḥṣ ʾan ʾĀṣim* (or: *Warsh ʾan Nāfiʾ*), since only two from an earlier multiplicity of traditions are still in use, in the East the tradition of Ḥaḥṣ (d. 180/796), transmitting from

‘Āṣim (d. 128/745), in the West that of Warsh (d. 197/812), transmitting from Nāfi‘ (d. 169/785), both dating from the eighth/ninth century, though fixed as closed traditions (*qirā’āt*) only in the ninth/tenth century by Ibn Mujāhid (Melchert 2000).

The Oral Qur’ān: The Message and its Communication Process

Yet, though the text transmitted to us may be considered a reliable source for the study of the Qur’ān as received by the Muslim community from the eighth century onward, when it was definitely fixed through an orthographic reform (Hamdan 2006), it does not immediately reflect the sequence of communications conveyed by Muḥammad. The transmitted text is presented as a fixed, “frozen” text, a codex (*muṣḥaf*), whereas the prophet’s communications are oral texts, in the Qur’ān itself termed *qur’ān*, “recitation, reading” or “text to be recited.” Whereas the single text units (*sūras*) collected in the *muṣḥaf* are not interrelated but juxtaposed unconnected to each other, the oral communications dynamically build on each other, later ones often expressing a rethinking of earlier ones, sometimes even inscribing themselves into earlier texts.

There is, thus, ample reason to assume intertextuality between single communications of the oral *qur’ān*, one that no longer exerts an effect in the *muṣḥaf*, where the temporal sequence of the *sūras* plays no role, all texts being considered equally divine and eternal. By their definition as communications, these Qur’ānic texts must also refer to issues and incidents “external” to the text itself, to an accompanying unspoken text thus embodied in the discourses that were debated in the circles of the listeners. The oral Qur’ān – to use a simplifying metaphor – structurally may be compared to a telephone conversation where the speech of only one party is audible, yet the (unheard) speech of the other is in no way totally absent, but roughly deducible from the audible part of the exchange. Indeed, the social concerns and theological debates of the listeners of the Qur’ān are widely reflected in the text pronounced through the prophet’s voice.

In terms of genre it thus appears problematic to describe Qur’ānic speech as prose speech, let alone as narrative. With reference to the linguistic theory proposed by Karl Bühler (1965), who differentiates between information, presentation, and appeal, one might hold that most Qur’ānic speech falls under the category of appeal addressed, often explicitly, sometimes implicitly, to listeners. The listeners, again, are present in the text itself, being addressed, exhorted, encouraged, or reprimanded. In order to do justice to the Qur’ān as a communication to listeners, one would therefore be best to speak of a dramatic text, when referring to the period of its oral communication to the listeners during the lifetime of Muḥammad. It is thus necessary to differentiate between the Qur’ān as it was communicated by the prophet to the first listeners who were still in the process of becoming his community, and the Qur’ān as a codex that, after the death of Muḥammad, became the scripture of a community of believers. Both readings of the Qur’ān, though relying on the same material basis, presuppose a diverse scenario of reception and thus follow different hermeneutics.

Considering the oral Qur’ān one has to distinguish – borrowing theoretically from the literary genre of drama (Pfister 1994), which generically comes closest to the

Qur'ānic communication process – between an exterior and an interior “level of communication.” On the exterior level, the divine voice – mediated through the address of the prophet and fixed in a sequence of communications determined to a great extent by the redactors of the text – confronts the readers of the written Qur'ān. In contrast, on the interior level of communication, the speaker, Muḥammad, and his listeners are interacting. There is a third agent, the divine voice, who on the interior level continuously speaks to the prophet, but only rarely directly to the listeners. The divine voice, through his speech, stages the entire scenario, thus acting as both a protagonist and the stage director at the same time. On the exterior level of communication, the divine voice has merged with that of the prophet; the entire drama no longer matters since the book is received as God's immediate speech. The former listeners have disappeared from the stage, reduced to mere objects of the sole divine speaker's speech. Their active role in the communication process has been shifted to the readers of the *muṣṣḥaf*. The scenarios of the Qur'ān as a communication process and as a scripture are, thus, essentially diverse.

However complicated and perhaps ultimately unsatisfactory any endeavor to reconstruct the Qur'ānic communication process may be, it is an indispensable scholarly task to shed light on the founding event of Islam, the orally performed drama between the messenger and his listeners. Two achievements are due to this communication process: the emergence of the Muslim scripture and the constitution of a community. Qur'ānic studies should therefore not remain limited to the exterior level of communication, to the codex addressing the readers, but – in order to do justice to the multi-layered text of the Qur'ān – try to unearth instances of the communication process underlying the canonical text.

In the following, the changing self-designations of the Qur'ān, *qur'ān* and *kitāb*, will be taken as a guideline for exploring traces of the communication process. Each of them stands for a phase in the development of text structure in the Qur'ān's successive increase in authority, and, at the same time, in the emergence of the community. We will proceed historically, trying to reconstruct some aspects of its earliest (i.e., early Meccan) self-image, the recited text, termed *qur'ān*. The next stage to be analyzed will be the turn from the Qur'ānic self-understanding as a recitation to that of an ensemble of both *qur'ān* and *kitāb*, the earthly manifestation of the heavenly scripture – a turn in reference that occurs in the middle to late Meccan period. At a still later stage, that of the Medinan texts, the Qur'ān itself becomes a manifestation of the scripture, *kitāb*. The codex, *muṣṣḥaf*, as we saw, marks the final stage where the Qur'ān has become “the Book” itself. All of these stages will be discussed as to the overall structure of the textual manifestation behind the self-designation in question, the place and time coordinates that govern the agents involved in the communication, and, finally, some characteristic key concepts that mark the four diverse discourses through the Qur'ānic development.

The Oral Qur'ān: The Early Meccan Texts and their Structure

During the communication process itself, the most frequent self-designation of the text is *qur'ān*, “recitation, reading,” or “text to be recited, read” (Neuwirth 2014a), for example, Q 85:21; 84:21; 73:4, 20; 72:1. The *sūras* commonly considered the oldest, i.e.,

those that display *sajf*, rhymed prose, in the strict sense – short speech units rhyming in frequently changing sound patterns reiterating the last consonant and based on a common rhythm – are made up of mono-partite verses containing one phrase each, for example, Q 70:8–9: *yawma takūnu l-samā'u ka'l-muhl/wa-takūnu l-jibālu ka'l-ihn* (“On the day heaven will be like dispersed wool/and the mountains be like molten brass”). The longer compositions of later times, their style too complex to be pressed into short *sajf* phrases, usually display a bi-partite (consisting of two phrases) structure, for example, Q 54:42, or even pluri-partite (more than two phrases) verse, for example, Q 37:102. The relative length of the verses should not be dismissed as simply conditioned by a more or less complex content. Rather, the transition from *sajf* speech to a more ordinarily flowing though still poetically tinted articulation attests to the transformation of an adherence to the standard pre-Islamic tradition into a novel literary paradigm of artistic prose, one that may be considered as a genuine Qurʾānic development marking a new stage in the history of the Arabic literary language (Neuwirth 2014b).

Ever since the sensational hypothesis presented by D. H. Müller (1896), claiming a strophic composition for the *sūras*, was dismissed without further scrutiny by subsequent scholarship, the possibility that “a firm hand was in full control” of the composition and structure of individual *sūras* has been virtually excluded. Countering this view, I hold that, when subjected to microstructural analysis,¹ clearly discernible structures emerge in the Qurʾān from beneath the surface. These structures mirror a historical development. The crucial procedures demanded for achieving a valid periodization are, however, extremely complex, having to proceed from a thorough investigation of Qurʾānic rhyme to that of the verse and then to that of paragraph structure in relation to the diverse semantic units, a work that is still in progress.

Particularly in the short *sūras*, distinctive verse groups can be isolated that often form part of a clear-cut pattern of proportions. Thus, Q 75 is built on the following balanced verse groups: 6 + 6 + 6 + 6 + 5 + 5 + 5; Q 70 is made up of 6 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 9; Q 79 entails two groups of nine verses, its proportions being strikingly balanced, 5 + 9/6 + 6 + 6/9 + 5; and Q 51 is made up of groups of 9 + 14 + 14 + 9 + 7 + 7 verses. Similar cases are found in many of those early Meccan *sūras* that exceed some ten verses, proportions being obviously a mnemonic device required in a situation where memorizing without written support was demanded from the listeners.

What is true for Meccan *sūras* in general applies to the early Meccan texts in particular. In their final compositions they are intentional units that reflect a natural growth, not a haphazard combination of diverse elements. The following list comprises only the main types of early Meccan structural elements or *enjeux*: (1) introductory oaths and oath clusters; or (2) clusters of *idhā-* (when) phrases conjuring the last day (see below). Very prominent are (3) sections about signs (*āyāt*) of divine omnipotence as attested in nature (e.g., Q 76:6–16; 77:25–7; 79:27–32; 80:24–32; 82:6–8; 88:17–20). From early times onward, there are (4) sections of debate, both apologetic and polemic (e.g., Q 96:9–10; 53:59–60). Signs of divine power manifest in history take the shape of very short narratives – the invasion of Mecca Q 105, the Thamūd myth Q 101:11–15, the story of Pharaoh and Moses Q 79:15–26, or ensembles of similar narratives like Q 51 (which includes Abraham and Lot, Q 51:34–7; Moses and Pharaoh, Q 51:38–40; ʿĀd,

Q 51:41–2; Thamūd, Q 51:34–7; Noah, Q 51:46) or evocations of stories (*sūras* 51; 53; 69; 73; 85; 89). The latter sometimes form lists: Q 51; 53; 69; 89. It is noteworthy that the longer narratives which occur in the first Meccan period are split into two equal halves exactly after the peripetia of the story, thus forming proportionate structures: Q 79:15–26, six plus six verses; Q 51:24–37, seven plus seven verses; and Q 68:17–34, nine plus nine verses.

Early Meccan *sūras* not only contain clues as to their oral composition, they also in some cases explicitly refer to their genesis out of their public performance. It is interesting to notice that the recitation of verses certainly intended to edify a believing public, such as the lengthy hymn on divine omnipotence in Q 53:59–62, is continued by a reproachful address to those among the listeners who did not show themselves impressed by the pious text, but obviously ridiculed the prophet: *a-fa-min hādihā l-ḥādīthi taʿjabūn/wa-tashḥakūna wa-lā tabkūn/wa antum sāmīdūn/fa-sjudū li-llāhi wa-ʿbudū* (“Do you marvel at this discourse? Do you laugh and do you not cry while you make merry? Prostrate yourselves before God and serve Him”). These verses are an immediate response to the poor reactions the recitation had received.

In other instances, for example Q 70:36–7, the stage director’s comment singles out particular listeners from an otherwise obviously well-behaving public. After the recitation of a catalogue of virtues ascribed to the God-fearing that certainly was meant to address a more general public, the behavior of the unbelieving listeners is criticized: *Fa-mā li-lladhīna kafarū qibalaka muḥṭiʿīn/ʿani l-yamīni wa ʿani l-shimāli ʿizzīn* (“What ails the unbelievers, running with their outstretched necks towards you? On the right and on the left hand in knots”). The immediacy of the reaction to their behavior allows us to conclude that entire sections of the early *sūras* originated in the very situation of performance.

Further instances of Qurʾānic verses critical of the behavior of unbelievers (e.g., Q 96:8f.; 77:48; 107:4f.) suggest that the recitations took place in close context with liturgical gatherings (Neuwirth 1996). Cases like the ones presented depict a lively scenario of the performance of the recitation where the prophetic mediator of the Qurʾānic speech is shown to be well aware of the process of its reception.

Place, time, and agents in the early Meccan sūras

The pre-Islamic literary paradigm implies a perception of space as a challenge to humans because nature is not at their disposal. It is embattled space, demanding to be recovered by the Bedouin hero. Nor does the picture of nature that the ancient poets design for framing their poems express an enjoyment of nature or aesthetic delight; rather, what is portrayed is the search for the reconstruction of the lost shape of that space (Hamori 1979), a space formerly replete with fulfilling social interaction but meanwhile decayed and disfigured through climatic influences. In contrast to such a heroic attitude of man towards space, the early Qurʾānic revelations in their *āyāt*-sections present earthly space as particularly inspiring of confidence. They present it as a locus of pleasure and enjoyment, as a venue for the reception of divine bounty and as a

site of ethically charged social interaction (Neuwirth 2014b). An early and dominant image is that of a well-preserved tent, allowing man to repose, to enjoy matrimonial life, as well as to pursue his daily activities in a peaceful and self-confident way. Q 78:6–16 strongly reminds one of some psalms of praise – particularly Psalm 104 – which interpret worldly space as a secure housing for the created beings (Neuwirth 2010c). Worldly space, then, is a divine grace demanding gratitude, which, in turn, will enhance the coherence of the relationship between God and humankind. There is a whole Qur’ānic genre of hymnic praises of divine omnipotence, labeled in the Qur’ān itself as *āyāt* (Graham 1995).

The real space of the Qur’ānic event is, however, not nature, but the city. Its ideal image (see *sūrat al-balad*, “The city,” Q 90) is presented in the Qur’ān as being governed by an ethical code which aims at a fair distribution of goods achieved in an unheroic manner (Rippin 1996). It is the experience of the city as a structured space that in the Qur’ān provides the metaphors to communicate that code. In reality, however, the hometown of the prophet and the early community was a locus of communal strife. The stubborn opposition of the Meccan elite, epitomized by their refusal to accept Muḥammad’s message, appeared as a late restaging of the frequent historical catastrophes that had befallen earlier communities of city dwellers throughout the Arabian Peninsula (Horovitz 1926).

The early *sūras* often point to deserted sites formerly inhabited by prosperous communities which have disintegrated and passed away. Their catastrophic end is, however, not attributed to the collapse, sudden or cumulative, of their earthworks and irrigation systems or the destruction of their buildings, but to events imagined as punishments for their disbelief and rejecting earlier messengers. The significance of the stories which stereotypically feature a messenger who calls his people to the worship of the one God lies in the Arabian messengers’ endurance (*ṣabr*) and obedience in calling humans to accept divine guidance: every community should have been warned through a revelation in order to be spared temporary or eschatological punishment. It is noteworthy that the Qur’ānic virtue of patience is no mere endurance but presupposes triumph.

It is an outlasting of evil, rather than its transmuting. Its task is to outstay all opposition so that the good of prophecy is not overcome by the enmity of unbelief. Its endurance keeps the cause from capitulation, so that it may anticipate the victory that other factors will achieve. It is not, broadly, a suffering which in itself and of itself makes the fabric of the triumph that is to be. This calls for other forms whose opportunity tenacity ensures. (Cragg 1971: 158)

The sites of these events are, from the beginning, presented as collective *lieux de mémoire*. Contrary to the notion of deserted space in poetry, which is not due to any historical event relevant to the present but to the seasonal practices of the camel-breeding tribes who, with the beginning of the drought, would retreat to their own permanent sources of water, the deserted places in the Qur’ān are replete with meaning, assuring the listeners of a divinely endorsed order in which equilibrium between human action and welfare is achieved (Neuwirth 2014a).

Not only ethical behavior counts in early Meccan *sūras* but ritual observance as well. Day and night are structured by the sacred time periods required for prayer, which are often evoked in introductory sections of *sūras*. The most crucial innovation as to the understanding of time is, however, the introduction of eschatological prophecies. They abound in early Meccan *sūras*, most frequently figuring in the beginning. They may be introduced by oath clusters conjuring apocalyptic scenarios (e.g., Q 77:1–6; 79:1–7), with the most expressive being Q 100:1–5.

These oaths, contrary to biblical oath formulae, do not function as invocations of a supra-natural authority external to the text. The early *sūras*' claim to validity is not anchored in something beyond the text. One might speak of a poetic, rather than a theological truth-claim of the early texts (Neuwirth 1993). Apocalyptic prophecies may equally be introduced by *idhā* ("when") phrase clusters (e.g., Q 56:1–6; 81:1–13; 82:1–4; 84:1–5; 99:1–3), equally predicting the events of the "last day." Both types of clusters build up a pronouncedly rhythmical beginning to the *sūra*. In some cases the *idhā*-phrases are not confined to natural and cosmic phenomena but proceed to depict the preparations for the final judgment, such as the blowing of the trumpet, the positioning of the throne, the opening of the account books, and so forth. They are followed by a "then"-phrase, focusing the behavior of people in the apocalyptic setting (e.g., Q 69:15; 79:8; 99:4, 6) and their separation into the groups of the blessed and the condemned.

The ensuing descriptions of the hereafter are strictly divided into two counterparts. Introduced by phrases like *ammā...fa-*, *wa-ammā...fa-*, "as to those who..., they will..., but as to those who..., they will" (Q 101:6–9), or *wujūh^{um}...wujūh^{um}*, "faces (will that day look)...and other faces (will look)..." (Q 80:38–42), they juxtapose the situation of the believers in the paradisiacal garden with that of the unbelievers or evildoers in the tribulations to be suffered in the fires of hell. It is noteworthy that both depictions are particularly rich in imagery and together form a double image, consisting of either an equal number of verses, or of two verse groups displaying a proportional relation to each other. As such, they remind us of the closely juxtaposed pictorial representations of both sections of the hereafter depicted in church iconography, thus suggesting the designation of "diptychs." Not infrequently, diptychs comprise recollections of the particular behavior of the inmates of the two abodes during their worldly life, serving to justify their eschatological fate. These flashbacks are sometimes interspersed with direct speech, some of them merging into a catalogue of virtues to be emulated or vices to be avoided.

Who are the listeners of the early *sūras*? Islamic tradition presents them as chiefly pagans, admitting the exception of some individuals imprinted by Christian beliefs and knowledge. Certainly the observance of the rites at the Ka'ba occasionally documented in the early *sūras* points to a public that was not strictly monotheistic. Still, the linguistic situation of the Qur'ān attests a close vicinity of the speakers of the language reflected in the Qur'ān to Christian culture (see Griffith 2001, 2002). Although the hypotheses proffered by Lüling (1974) and Luxenberg (2000), who claim a Christian origin of the Qur'ānic texts, are methodologically and historically unfounded, they alert us anew to the often underestimated part that Christian thinking would have

played in urban centers of the Peninsula like Mecca. A mass of Christian loan words already existing in the urban language of Mecca (Jeffery 1938) – not coined for the Qurʾān – attests to the close contacts entertained by the adherents of the cultus of the Kaʿba to Christians. We may thus assume that the early listeners were syncretistic in their beliefs, at least in part adhering to the rites of the Kaʿba and, at the same time, familiar with some monotheist thinking, many inclined to accept monotheism, but with a strong group, the Meccan elite, still unwilling to share the belief in the last day, let alone its imminence.

What characterizes the early Qurʾānic texts is a plethora of designations for “the last day”: “the day of judgment,” *yawm al-dīn* (Q 51:12), “the hour,” *al-sāʿa* (Q 79:42), “the day of separation,” *yawm al-faṣl* (Q 77:13), “the day of resurrection,” *yawm al-qiyāma* (Q 75:6) and its harbingers, designated by particular Qurʾānic coinages, without exception in the grammatical form of feminine participles, chosen to sound enigmatic and often threatening, such as *al-qāriʿa*, “the knocking one” (Q 104:1); *al-rājifa*, “the quake” (Q 79:6); *al-hāqqa*, “the inevitable” (Q 69:1 f.); *al-āzifa*, “the one coming close” (Q 53:57); and the like. The striking predominance of feminine morphology in eschatological contexts (Sells 1999) still awaits systematic investigation.

Eschatological sections are certainly most characteristic for the early *sūras*. It is all the more striking that there are other texts equally phrased in *saʿf* prose that display a no less prominent, but different and complex, set of expressions betraying a close relation to the biblical psalms: liturgical words and phrases such as the invitation to hold liturgy, *sabbih*, “praise” (Q 87:1), *rattil al-qurʾān*, “recite” (Q 73:4), *kabbir (rabbaka)*, “magnify your Lord” (Q 74:3), *iqraʿ bi-smi rabbika*, “pronounce the name of your Lord” (96:1), and the doxology *tabāraka*, “praise be to” (Q 67:1) (Baumstark 1947).

Obviously, in the Qurʾān elements familiar from otherwise separately transmitted traditions merge to form an ensemble: on the one hand, enigmatic speech heavily relying on sound with resonances, echoes, and undertones, such as were used by ancient Arabian soothsayers (*kahana*), creating a linguistic medium apt for arousing anxiety and tension in the minds of the listeners. On the other hand, the long established tradition of monotheistic hymnal speech relying on syntactic stratagems such as parallelisms rather than phonetic and equally fit to arouse emotions, is not foreign to Qurʾānic speech either. Both together serve to generate the “distinctive Qurʾānic combination of awe and intimacy” (Sells 1999: 204).

Structure of the Later Meccan Texts

The composition of the *sūras* substantially changes in later Meccan times. Although initially embedded in catalogues of narratives of partly extra-biblical tradition, stories about major biblical figures, like Moses, Jesus, and a number of patriarchs known from Genesis, gain a function of their own. They become the stock inventory of the central part of longer Meccan *sūras*, most of them renarrated more than once. The phenomenon of recurring narratives retold in slightly diverging fashions has often been interpreted as mere repetition and thus as a deficiency. These forms deserve, however,

to be studied as testimonies to the consecutive emergence of a community and thus reflective of the process of canonization, their divergence then pointing to a successively changing narrative pact, to a continuing education of the listeners, and to the development of a moral consensus that is reflected in the texts.

In contrast to the meticulous shaping of personages and the sophisticated coding and decoding of their motives (which are characteristic of biblical narrative: Alter 1981), Qur'ānic narrating pursues complex "para-narrative" aims. Narratives, at least in so far as they are unfolded to some extent and recall plots already known from biblical literature, are presented as excerpts or messages from the heavenly scripture. Sidney Griffith has summarized this post-biblical lore under the label of the "interpreted Bible" (Griffith 2013). In the Qur'an the "interpreted Bible" is understood as a corpus of knowledge aloof from the secular extra-biblical lore circulating through oral tradition at the time. This remoteness of "*kitāb*-generated" narrative has a strong bearing on the style of the stories presented as "*kitāb*" readings. The transcendent origin imprints them with a distinct linguistic code that, on the one hand, confers on the diction a highly stylized form (rhymed prose resulting in somewhat unusual syntactic structures); on the other hand, this code implants these narratives with the new message of the imminent eschatological catastrophe, bringing the narrative close to an exhortative appeal, or later, a sermon. It is precisely the discursive elements which are so marginal in biblical narrative that matter primarily in the Qur'ānic narrative, the explicit presentation of the moral or theological implications for the community that can be deduced from the narrated facts of speeches. To fulfill this purpose, in the later *sūras* a stylistic device unknown to the Bible is introduced to accommodate the particular moral or theological deductions from the Qur'ānic discourse, the *clausula* (Neuwirth 1981: 157–70). This stylistic device consists in a particular closure of the long verses of late Meccan and Medinan times; the last sentence of a verse often does not partake in the main strand of communication but presents a comment on its contents, indicating divine approval or disregard of the fact reported: "Truly, you were among the sinners" (*innaki kunti min al-khāṭi'īn*, Q 12:29). It may also refer to one of God's attributes, as in "Truly, He is the hearer the seer" (*innahu huwa 'l-samī'u al-baṣīr*, Q 17:1), which in the later stages of Qur'ānic development became parameters of ideal human behavior.

It is noteworthy that the more complex later *sūras* refer to scripture both through their transmission of scriptural texts and through their dependence on the mnemonic technicalities of writing for ensuring their conservation. Though clear-cut proportions still occur between major sections of the later *sūras*, in view of the stylistic form – later verses are filled by complex, lengthy segments – it seems most probable that the transmission of the text at this stage involved writing. At the same time, structures gradually become looser; the distinct tripartite composition prevailing in middle Meccan times comprising a discursive introduction, a narration, and a discursive concluding section often becomes blurred, with narratives being replaced by discursive sections. Many compositions also display secondary expansions, a phenomenon that still needs further investigation. Yet, for the bulk of the middle and late Meccan *sūras*, the claim to a tripartite composition can be sustained.

From Ritual to Textual Coherence

As to the function of Qurʾānic stories, we may localize a turn with the middle Meccan Q 15, where, for the first time, an allusion is made to the existence of a particular form of service in which scripture functions as the cardinal section. In the same text there is also mention of the existence of a communal prayer, the *fātiḥa* (see Q 15:37; Neuwirth and Neuwirth 1991; Neuwirth 2000, 2014b). Since the middle Meccan *sūras* are obviously recited as part of worship, they have acquired a strictly liturgical function. In these *sūras* the reference to the Meccan sacred area (*ḥaram*, *bayt*) as the central warrant of the social coherence of the community has been replaced by new symbols.

Instead of introductory allusions to liturgical times and sacred space that evoked the Meccan sanctuary and its rites (Neuwirth 1993), we encounter an evocation of the scripture, be it clad in an oath (Q 36:2; 37:3; 38:1; 43:2; 44:2; 50:1) or through a deictic affirmation of its presence (Q 2:2; 10:1; 12:1; 13:1 etc.). In view of the increasing interest of the community in the biblical heritage as part of their own emerging monotheistic identity, it comes as no surprise that the bulk of the middle and late Meccan *sūras*, which by now had developed into long, generically heterogeneous texts, seem to mirror a monotheistic service, starting with an initial dialogical section (hymnal, apologetic, polemic, paraenetic) and closing with a generically related section, most frequently an affirmation of the Qurʾānic revelation. These framing sections have been compared to the ecclesiastic forms of worship, particularly the initial and concluding *responsorialia* recited by the priest or deacon with the community. The center of the monotheistic service, and similarly of the fully developed *sūra* of the middle and late Meccan period, is frequently occupied by a biblical reminiscence – in the case of the ecclesiastic service, a *lectio*, a reading from the Bible, in the case of the *sūra*, a narrative focusing on biblical protagonists. A religious tradition, essentially dependent on written texts – the positioning of biblical pericopes in the center of the service – has thus made its way into the structure of the community's emerging identity (Neuwirth 2005). Using a category set up by the religious anthropologist Jan Assmann (1992), one might describe this change in orientation, shifting from the focusing of local sacred traditions to that of the sacred history located in the Holy Land, *al-arḍ allatī bāraknā fīhā* (Q 21:71, 81), as a transition of the community “from ritual coherence to textual coherence.”

In these middle and late Meccan texts, polemic and apologetic sections frequently appear as framing parts of a *sūra*. From early Meccan *sūras* onward they mostly serve to affirm the rank of the Qurʾān as a divine revelation, usually constituting the nucleus of concluding sections (Q 74:54–5). In later *sūras* these concluding affirmations of the revelation tend to merge into exhortations of the prophet (Q 11:109–23).

Stories in the later *sūras* are often explicitly referred to as elements of the transcendent scripture, *al-kitāb* (Madigan 2001). Indeed, some *sūras* identify themselves as drawing on a pre-existing, more extensive text; that is, they are seen as excerpts from a heavenly scripture. Such a scripture, obviously imagined as being unchangeable and comprehensive, presupposes a stream of tradition that has come to a standstill and become “frozen,” constituting a store of warranted knowledge. Qurʾānic reference to scripture, therefore, presupposes a certain stock of narratives existing in a previously

fixed form and dispatched by the divine sender in single portions to form neatly composed pericopes to be inserted into a more extensive Qur'ānic recital that also contains less universal elements, such as the debate about ephemeral issues of the community. This ceremonial function of the biblically inspired narrative is underlined by introductory formulas, for example, *wa-dhkur fī'l-kitāb*, "mention in (the excerpt of) the book" (Q 19:16). At a later stage, in Medina, as the particular form of revelation communicated to the Muslim community is regarded as constituting a scripture of its own, meaning that community matters are acknowledged as part of salvation history, whole *sūras* figure as manifestations of *al-kitāb*.

Place, time, and agents in the later Meccan sūras

In the middle and late Meccan *sūras*, a new framework of the message in terms of space is realizable. These texts, which abound in accounts of biblical narratives, have broadened the scope for the listeners, who are led away from their local surroundings to a distant landscape, the Holy Land, familiar as the scenery where the history of the community's spiritual forebears has taken place. The introduction of the orientation in prayer, *qibla*, towards Jerusalem is an unequivocal testimony of this general change in spatial orientation. It would have been adopted during a phase of development when, through the new focus on biblical lore, a remarkable widening of the young community's horizons was taking place, in terms of time as well as space. One might dare to hypothesize that the Jerusalem *qibla* came about as a gestural expression of the deeply felt experience of having gained new spiritual horizons. Together, two essential novelties – the newly attained convergence of the Qur'ānic revelations with the scriptures of the two other monotheistic religions and the simultaneous adoption of the *topographia sacra* of the earlier religions – marked a new self-consciousness for the young Islamic community. The new self-awareness was no longer based primarily on the rites practiced at the Ka'ba, but on a new source of authority, the consciousness of being among the receivers and bearers of a scripture, and as such, having a share in the memory of salvation history, transported by the medium of writing.

By its very gesture, the *qibla*, oriented towards Jerusalem, points to this new connection between the emerging Islamic community and the older religions. It is not surprising, then, that the Qur'ānic allusion to the Meccan sanctuary and its rites as the previous guarantors of social coherence – allusions, up until that point, so numerous in the introductory sections of the Meccan *sūras* – were soon replaced by a stereotypical introductory evocation of the scripture, *al-kitāb*, now recognized as the most significant common spiritual possession, a spiritual space replacing the real space.

In the earliest *sūras*, up to the point of the emigration, there had been few places considered worth evoking with the exception of Mecca and some deserted sites in Arabia; after that point, however, one does not find any further reference to Mecca (with the exception of Q 17:1). Instead, the "Blessed Land" is introduced as a space in which the oppressed believer may take refuge and where most of the prophets had worked; the *sūras* culminate in an oft-repeated appeal to examples reaching far back into the history

of the spiritual forebears. Jerusalem, represented through its temple, is the center of the space marked by the Banū Isrāʾīl's scripture and, thus, by writing. All prayers gravitate in the direction of Jerusalem as their natural destination (Neuwirth 2003).

The vast majority of these *sūras* start with an evocation of the scripture, *kitāb*, and are often introduced by a chiffre, a single letter from the Arabic alphabet or a set of such letters which serves to underscore divine authorship but which is missing in the early *sūras*. This beginning seems to hint at a newly achieved cultic function of the recited text, which is no longer understood as the immediate communication of an inspired message to the community but as a recital from a heavenly scripture assumed as pre-existing and only reproduced through recitation. With the innovation of the orientation in prayer, *qibla*, towards a new sacred space, the "more remote temple" (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*), prayer gained new momentum. Through replacing the local "sacred sanctuary" (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) by an imagined other, the rites of *ṣalāt*, which themselves had previously been part of the syncretistic cultus centered around the Kaʿba, became a rite filled with salvific historical significance. Through the *fātiḥa*, the communal prayer, institutionalized in middle Meccan times, the expression "Lord of the worlds," or more precisely "Lord of the inhabitants of the worlds" (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*), becomes prominent. It occurs already in some very early *sūras* (Q 81:29; 83:6) to express a particularly comprehensive divine predicate. The Arabic *rabb al-ʿālamīn*, contrary to the Hebrew cognate, *ribbōn ʿōlām* (in the sense of "Lord of eternity"), does not exclusively denote a temporal relation, but rather refers to God as the Lord of human beings who are bound to both worlds, the mundane and the one beyond – a text-political stratagem to relocate the status of mankind as an integral part of the new eschatological worldview. While the case demonstrates the closeness of Qurʾānic diction to that of other monotheist traditions, at the same time it also highlights a peculiar Qurʾānic new reading of those traditions.

Becoming a Representation of the "Scripture": Medinan Texts

In Medina *sūras* have not only given up their tripartite scheme but also display much less sophistication in the patterns of their composition. One type may be summarily termed the "rhetorical" *sūra* or sermon (Q 22; 24; 33; 47; 48; 49; 57 to 66); they consist of an address to the community whose members are called upon directly by formulas such as *yā ayyuhā ʿl-nās* (Q 22:1, "O people"). In these *sūras*, which in some cases (59; 61; 62; 64) are stereotypically introduced by initial hymnal formulas strongly reminiscent of the biblical psalms, the prophet, now designated as *al-nabī*, appears no longer as a mere transmitter of the message but as a salvific historical protagonist personally addressed by God in the formula *yā ayyuhā ʿl-nabī*, "O prophet" (Q 33:22), or as an agent acting in synergy with the divine persona and appearing as *Allāhu wa-rasūluhu*, "God and his prophet" (Q 33:22). With the inclusion of texts about – sometimes ephemeral – community matters into the category of divine rulings, *qurʾān*, "recitation, reading" has become identical with *kitāb*, the excerpts from the heavenly scripture. In contrast to the widely monothematic, medium-sized Medinan *sūras* that come close to

sermons, the bulk of the Medinan texts are quite complex. Most of the so-called “long *sūras*” (Q 2–5; 8; 9) cease to be neatly structured compositions but appear to be the result of a process of collection that we cannot yet reconstruct. A systematic study of these *sūras* remains an urgent desideratum in the field.

With few exceptions, in the Medinan *sūras* we once more encounter the Meccan “enjeux,” though the eschatological sections and the *āyāt*, the signs of divine omnipotence derived from nature, are no longer unfolded at length, but are rather summarily evoked. This should not be taken as a decisive shift in spiritual interest. Although new topics which occupy the focus of the community’s attention do emerge, the earlier topics remain present, since it is the partial corpus of the early *sūras*, later assembled in the final part of the codex, which the believers know by heart and which serves as the textual basis for the emerging ritual prayers.

Although occasional regulations – mostly concerning cultic matters – do occur in Meccan *sūras* (e.g., Q 73:1–3, addressed to the prophet, revised for the community in Q 73:20), more elaborate regulations concerning not only cultic but also communal affairs figure in the Medinan context. Their binding force is sometimes underlined by a reference to the transcendent source, such as “it is prescribed for you,” *kutiba alaykum* (Q 2:183–7), or “a duty imposed by God,” *farīdatun min Allāh* (Q 9:60). Medinan regulations as a rule – though the Decalogue (Neuwirth 2014b) constitutes an exception – do not display any structured composition nor do they participate in neatly composed units; rather, they suggest a redaction of originally isolated texts.

A new element appearing in Medinan *sūras* is the report of contemporary events experienced or enacted by the community, for instance the battle of Badr in the year 2/624 (Q 3:123), the battle of Uḥud in 3/625 (Q 3:155–74), the expulsion of the Banū Naḍīr in 3/625 (Q 59:2–5), the siege of Khaybar in 7/628 (Q 48:15), the expedition to Tābūk in 9/630 (Q 9:29–35), or the farewell sermon of the prophet in 10/631 (Q 5:1–3). It is noteworthy that these reports do not display a particularly artistic literary rendering. Nor do they betray any particular pathos. It does not come as a surprise, then, that, unlike the situation in Judaism and Christianity where biblical history has been fused to form a mythical drama of salvation, no such great narrative has arisen from the Qur’ān itself. A metahistorical blueprint of the genesis of Islam was constructed only later, and through the inclusion of a great amount of non-Qur’ānic material, through the *sīra*, the biography of the prophet. The Qur’ān itself admits mythopoiesis only rarely: to vindicate the founding of Meccan sanctuary by Abraham (Neuwirth 2016) and more essentially, to celebrate the process of revelation itself.

Place, time, and agents in the Medinan sūras

In early Medinan times, a new group of listeners, if not always real, at least virtual, appears on stage: the Medinan Jews. Jews appear as believers (Q 2:62; 5:69; 22:17), sometimes on the condition that they believe in the concrete Islamic message as in Q 4:162. In some other passages they appear as included among the People of the Book

(Q 3:113–14) and are, as such, even assured to be rewarded twice over, thanks to their belief in their own revealed scriptures as well as in the Qurʾān (Q 28:52–4; see Rubin 2002: 21–34). In later Medinan texts, however, they turn into the target of fierce Qurʾānic polemics.

Apart from the Medinan *sūras* as such, there are a number of Meccan *sūras* that have been extended through Medinan additions of re-reads with a new religious-political dimension of meaning (Neuwirth 2014b). Although additions are acknowledged in Islamic tradition (Nagel 1995) and were marked as such in earlier Qurʾānic scholarship (Nöldeke 1909–38), these texts have not yet been systematically studied (for a first attempt see Neuwirth 2004). The term “Medinan additions” is, of course, not to be understood in the sense of textual interpolations inserted into the *sūras* after their codification. They should rather be considered as additions entailing specifications or modifications (see Q 74:30 modifying 74:1) that were communicated together with their respective Meccan basis texts on the occasion of a later recitation of those Meccan *sūras* during the prophet’s activity. Though we may assume that the long Medinan *sūras*, in view of the mnemotechnical challenges posed by their prosaic verse structure, should have been preserved through writing, their primary social setting, and thus the site of their reception and debate, will not have changed but will have remained an oral public performance.

Medinan *sūras* reflect a retrograde movement in comparison to that observed in the later Meccan texts: from the Holy Land, the realm of the history of the earlier People of the Book, back to the Peninsula, in particular Mecca. Not only is the orientation of prayer shifted from Jerusalem to the Meccan sanctuary, the image of the exodus of Moses and his people is equally banished from its scope. The new prophet steps into the footsteps of the greatest prophet of the Bible; the voice of Moses in the Medinan Qurʾān fuses with that of Muḥammad (Neuwirth 2014c). We see the emergence of the figure of Abraham as the new role model of the prophet Muḥammad whose act of founding the Meccan sanctuary and initiating its rites establishes a new salvific paradigm. The prophet Muḥammad completes the work started by Abraham by furnishing Mecca with the essential merit of being the original site of revelation (Q 2:127), which had, until then, been the prerogative of Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:3).

Thus, in Medina the honorific name of the Kaʿba, “the sacred sanctuary” (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*), acquired new momentum. It is the center of the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), an institution founded by Abraham. Abraham, who historically precedes the rest of the prophets, is a pure monotheist, a *ḥanīf*. The Arabic word is a cognate of Syriac *ḥanpā*, meaning people not belonging to the church, perceived as pagans (de Blois 2002) and, in the Bible, credited with the introduction of circumcision (Hebrew *milah*) as a token of his covenant with God; the concept reappears in the Qurʾān as the warrant of a covenantal creed, called *millat Ibrāhīm*. The new community that follows the Abrahamic creed is portrayed as now having a religion of its own, expressed by the word *dīn*, a homonym of the earlier-employed *dīn* in the sense of reckoning, or divine judgment to be held on the “last day.” A visible symbol of this new religion is not least the fast (*ṣawm*) of Ramaḍān that commemorates the crucial privilege of the community to be receivers of a scripture of their own (Ammann 2001).

Note

- 1 The task has been carried out for the Meccan *sūras* by Neuwirth (1981). In view of newly developed additional criteria the work needs to be revised and complemented.

Further reading

- Al-Azmeh, Aziz (2014a) *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
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CHAPTER 10

Sacrality and Collection

Aliza Shnizer

The foundations for the Qur'ān's sacredness and standing as the major mainstay of Islamic religion and culture are to be found already in the book itself. The very fact that the word of God is expressed in direct speech and frequently in the first person plural bears witness to the book's divine character and places it within the domain of what may be defined as holy scripture *par excellence*: a book revealed by God or inspired by the holy spirit.

To the Qur'ān's divine nature testify also descriptions of its revelation, based on a heavenly source, as well as the various titles and metaphors used to describe it, such as the "book of God" (*kitāb Allāh*), "revelation" (*waḥy* or *tanzīl*), "light," as well as "precious book," "blessed book," "wise book," "tremendous book," "glorious," "honorable," and many other similar titles, epithets, and metaphors which serve to describe holy scriptures. The various descriptions of the revelation of the Qur'ān, its titles and descriptive appellations, appear inside the text next to tales of the prophets, commandments and laws, ethical sayings, and the other sundry topics we expect to find in a scripture. However, the sheer number of titles, descriptions, and metaphors used by the Qur'ān to describe its own nature as a divine book revealed by God Himself is quite unique.

Early Islamic tradition (*ḥadīth* in Arabic), which reflects major landmarks in the history of Islam and Islamic civilization, added to these titles and metaphors, and provided profuse descriptions of the Qur'ān's divine origin, the mode of its revelation to the prophet Muḥammad, and the way in which it was cast into a single text. An examination of the traditions of this type which were disseminated during the first two centuries of Islam, a time when *ḥadīth* was taking shape, sheds light on the process by which the

Qur'ān's standing within the Muslim community was established, until it became the supreme focus of sanctity in Islam. On the basis of such early Islamic traditions one may conclude that consolidation of the Qur'ān's status went hand in hand with the development of Muslims' perception of their religion, which had undergone various transformations during the first centuries of Islam. These transformations and their relation to the process by which the Qur'ān's status as scripture became consolidated are reflected not only in the *ḥadīth* texts, but also in the writings of Muslim scholars in the centuries that followed, where an attempt was made to cope with the many nuances, contradictions, and difficulties which they had inherited from earlier Muslims, the creators of the *ḥadīth*. In this chapter *ḥadīth* texts will be utilized as a window into the thoughts of its creators, Muslim believers who lived many decades after the prophet's death and whose religious ideas were reflected in the way they chose to describe the divine nature of the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān's Divine Origin and Nature

The Qur'ān itself was the major source which shaped the Islamic tradition. Early Muslims based their ideas about the Qur'ān's divine nature first and foremost on the verses of the Qur'ān. It was the Qur'ān from which they adopted the terms the "preserved tablet" (*lawḥ mahfūz*, Q 85:21–2), the "mother of the book" (*umm al-kitāb*, Q 43:4), the "concealed book" (*kitāb makhnūn*, Q 56:78), and the "reminder" (*al-dhikr*, Q 21:105), which became synonymous in Islamic tradition with the original heavenly copy of the Qur'ān, the celestial archetype from which revelations were sent down to the prophet (see also Jeffery 1952: 15–17; Wansbrough 1977: 83). The term "heavenly books" (*al-zubur*, Q 54:52) was also perceived as relating to the Qur'ān's origins, and understood as referring to the divine originals from which the Qur'ān was revealed (see al-Ṭabarī 1972: XXVII, 66).

The concept of a heavenly Qur'ān symbolizes in early traditions the intimate relationship between God Himself and the actual, "earthly" Qur'ān, and also the idea that the heavenly and earthly copies are identical. In one tradition, for example, the relationship between God and the Qur'ān is expressed as follows: "The glorious Qur'ān is inscribed on a preserved tablet near God" (al-Ṭabarī 1972: XXX, 90). In the same spirit another tradition maintains that the preserved tablet is inscribed on the forehead of Isrāfīl, the most senior of the angels of revelation, who stands by the divine throne (see al-Ṭabarī 1972: XXX, 90; Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1997: X, 3414). The relation between the heavenly and earthly copies of the Qur'ān is clearly explained in a tradition which claims that the Qur'ān possessed by Muslims is identical to its heavenly counterpart. "The Qur'ān is found in the mother of the book near God," the tradition says, "from which it was copied" (al-Ṭabarī 1972: XXV, 30). The idea that the heavenly and earthly Qur'āns are identical is linked in some other traditions with the claim that all scripture (meaning the Jewish and Christian Bibles as well) has its origin in the divine book located in heaven. "The mother of the book is the source of all scripture," says the tradition (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1997: II, 593). Later Muslim scholars reiterated the idea that all

scripture is of divine origin, making explicit the claim that the Qurʾān and the other holy scriptures were all copied from the mother of the book (see, for example, al-Qurṭubī 1987: XIX, 298; see also Graham 1987: 84).

The various appellations given to the divine copy of the Qurʾān are embedded within descriptions of its revelation to the prophet. The dominant view in these descriptions is that the Qurʾān was revealed in two stages. First, the Qurʾān was sent down in its entirety in a single occasion from the highest heaven, where the original copy is stored, to the lowest heaven. Then, it was sent down to Muḥammad in segments over a period of many years. An example of this view is a tradition quoting Ibn ʿAbbās, a well-known Qurʾānic commentator (cousin of Muḥammad, d. ca. 68/687), as saying that the Qurʾān was sent down “as a single utterance” (*jumla wāḥida*) from the heavenly books to the lowest heaven, whence its contents concerning commands, prohibitions, and wars were revealed at a moderate pace (al-Ṭabarī 1972: II, 84–5). The distinction made here between two separate stages of revelation is typical of descriptions of the Qurʾān’s revelation in general.

The formulation of these descriptions was influenced by the fact that the Qurʾān provides no clear and unambiguous explanation of the method by which the Qurʾānic text as it exists in the divine original was revealed to Muḥammad (see also Wansbrough 1977: 36–8). From these descriptions it is clear that early Muslims’ main motivation was the desire to resolve difficulties within that text; on the one hand, the Qurʾān describes its own revelation as a single occasion in the month of Ramaḍān (Q 2:185), or on a blessed night (Q 44:3), or on the night of divine decree (Q 97:1), but, on the other hand, as a multiple continuing occurrence (Q 25:32). The latter verse confirms the claim made by the unbelievers that the Qurʾān was not revealed as a “single utterance” but rather gradually, one segment at a time. Early Muslims were aware of the problematic nature of the description of the Qurʾān’s revelation having occurred in a single night or even in a single month. Such a description is in direct conflict not only with certain other Qurʾānic verses (and especially with Q 25:32), but also with numerous very ancient traditions that had grown around the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of numerous verses. These traditions, which expand the meaning of the Qurʾānic text and anchor many verses within a narrative background, have become a major feature of the genre known as “biography of the prophet” (*al-sīra al-nabawiyya*) and of early Qurʾānic commentaries (on the function of these traditions, see Rippin 1988; see also Rubin 1995: 226–33). They also clearly see revelation as a continuous and on-going process, a fact reflected in countless traditions in which various Qurʾānic verses are said to have been revealed over the years in reaction to various episodes in the prophet’s life.

The attempts of the early Muslim community to cope with the contradictions and occasional obscurity in the Qurʾān on this matter show clear signs of a desire to integrate the Qurʾānic view of revelation as a continuous, repetitive act (in particular according to Q 25:32) with the other Qurʾānic view, of a one-time revelation of the entire Qurʾān (mainly in Q 2:185 and Q 97:1). This latter view in the Qurʾān was probably influenced by the biblical account of the law handed down to Moses on Mt. Sinai, i.e., on a single occasion (see Wansbrough 1977: 37). The desire to find a compromise

between these two mutually contradictory views of the revelation brought about the formulation of a harmonizing approach according to which the Qurʾān was indeed sent down in one step in the heavenly stage, and was subsequently revealed to Muḥammad piecemeal over many years in the second, earthly stage. All the harmonizing descriptions make use of the Qurʾānic phrase “as a single utterance” (Q 25:32) to refer to the first stage of the revelation. In fact, the impression one gets from all the traditions dealing with the revelation of the Qurʾān is that they wish to emphasize the fact that it was sent down in its entirety at least in one of the stages of revelation. This is true in particular of a group of traditions which limit themselves to describing only the first stage of revelation (see al-Ṭabarī 1972: II, 85).

Using the harmonizing technique also solved the problem of the different accounts given in the Qurʾān for the time of the revelation: the night of divine decree, a “blessed night,” is claimed to have occurred in the month of Ramaḍān, thus resolving another potential contradiction. In fact, the opinion that in the first stage of revelation the Qurʾān was sent down in its entirety in the night of divine decree in the month of Ramaḍān has become generally accepted in Islamic tradition. (There is some disagreement among early traditions concerning the exact date of the night of divine decree, on which the Qurʾān was revealed. Various dates, all in the latter third of the month of Ramaḍān, are given; see al-Suyūfī 1985: VI, 416–18). The various verses on the matter were harmonized in an effort to introduce an unambiguous conception of the Qurʾān’s revelation which would preserve the Qurʾān’s own inner integrity and its status as a perfect, consistent, and coherent holy text.

In many of the harmonizing descriptions the question of God’s relation to the prophet arises. Two views predominate. On the one hand, the sending down of the Qurʾān is described as direct divine revelation, with no mediation between God and the prophet. In one typical tradition Ibn ‘Abbās says that “God has sent down the Qurʾān to the lowest heaven on the night of divine decree, and whenever He wanted to reveal anything of it He revealed it” (al-Ṭabarī 1972: II, 84–5; see also Ibn Abī Shayba 1989: VII, 191). In another quite similar tradition, God is not just the source of revelation, but also compiles the messages in Muḥammad’s lifetime after they had been revealed. “The Qurʾān in its entirety was sent down in one piece, on the night of divine decree in the month of Ramaḍān, to the lowest heaven,” this tradition says, “and when God wanted to cause something to happen on earth He sent down parts of it, until He collected [all of] it together” (Ibn al-Ḍurays 1987: 71–2; the term “collected” is frequently used in descriptions of the compilation of the Qurʾānic text by the caliphs after the prophet’s death). However, on the other hand, there is also a tendency to introduce an angel, Gabriel, as an intermediary between God and the prophet. The angel Gabriel’s role as an intermediary is based on Q 2:97, where he is represented as the angel in charge of revealing the Qurʾān to the prophet. It is this tendency which has received general acceptance; it is reflected in traditions, for example, with an identical chain of authorities as the traditions quoted above, but in which the angel Gabriel has replaced God as the agent of revelation. “The Qurʾān was sent down in one piece from the preserved tablet to the lowest heaven,” Ibn ‘Abbās says in such tradition, “and then Gabriel revealed it to Muḥammad; it contained what was said by the polytheists and its answer to them”

(Ibn Manda 1996: II, 705). The motivation behind ascribing the act of revelation to Gabriel was likely the desire of some early Muslims to refrain from describing God in anthropomorphic terms. But others, who wished to stress God's closeness to the Qur'ān, did not recoil from such metaphors and did indeed attribute the act of revelation to God.

Considerable emphasis is also laid in traditions on where in the lowest heaven the Qur'ān was placed before it was revealed to the prophet. In a manner similar to descriptions of the Qur'ān's starting point on the course to revelation on earth in the highest heaven, traditions also tend to describe its intermediate resting place as a temple of the angels in heaven, named the "temple of glory" (*bayt al-ʿizza*). One tradition, for example, quotes Ibn ʿAbbās as saying: "The Qur'ān was separated from the reminder (*al-dhikr*) and placed in the temple of glory in the lowest heaven. Then Gabriel began revealing it to the prophet by portions" (al-Ḥākīm al-Nīsābūrī 1990: II, 223). Later Islamic *ḥadīth* scholars explained the non-Qur'ānic term *bayt al-ʿizza* in the spirit of such traditions as a temple of the angels which was the model for the earthly Ka'ba (see Ibn Kathīr 1952: IV, 298). The non-Qur'ānic term *bayt al-ʿizza* is replaced in other versions by the Qur'ānic phrase "the inhabited house" (*al-bayt al-mā'mūr*) (Q 52:4), which, in Qur'ānic commentaries, has come to refer to the heavenly Ka'ba (see al-Ṭabarī 1972: II, 84–5). Qur'ānic expressions are also used in a tradition according to which additional angels played a part in sending down the Qur'ān. In this tradition Ibn ʿAbbās says that the Qur'ān was sent down in one piece from God, from the preserved tablet to the honorable scribes (an expression taken from Q 80:15–16, commonly taken to refer to the angels) who write in the lowest heaven. Then the scribes gave the Qur'ān to Gabriel in segments over twenty nights and Gabriel gave it to Muḥammad piece by piece over twenty years (al-Qurṭubī 1987: XVII, 224).

The symmetry between the twenty nights during which Gabriel received the Qur'ān from the angels and the twenty years it took him to reveal it is based on the common belief that the Qur'ān was revealed to Muḥammad during the twenty years of his prophetic mission. This belief is anchored in a very widely accepted canonical tradition according to which the Qur'ān was revealed to Muḥammad for ten years in Mecca (his first period of activity) and for another ten years in Medina (see Rubin 1995: 196–7). Traditions differ with respect to the amount of revealed text at different stages in the prophet's life. The texts in question are at times described in general terms as "segments" or "parts," but at times they are also characterized more specifically as containing a certain number of verses, one, two, four, five, and so on up to ten verses, which were revealed to the prophet at any one time (al-Suyūṭī 1991: I, 97; Nöldeke 1909–38: I, 29).

The piecemeal revelation of the Qur'ān, verse by verse over a period of many years, had the advantage of providing Muḥammad with ready-made solutions to the various challenges he faced throughout his life. According to the traditions, one major challenge he had to face was the arguments which polytheists used in an attempt to refute Islam and its prophet. Numerous traditions express this concern, as reflected in the tradition quoted above, according to which revealed Qur'ānic segments contained "what was said by the polytheists and its [i.e., the Qur'ān's] response to them." In another tradition the reaction contained in the earthly phase of the revelation to Muḥammad is phrased

as constituting “an answer to what people said.” This tradition describes the act of revelation as follows: “The Qurʾān was sent down in one piece on the night of divine decree in the month of Ramaḍān and was placed in the temple of glory. Then for twenty years it was revealed to the prophet as an answer to what people said” (Ibn al-Ḍurays 1987: 72; cf. Madigan 2001: 63–4). The literary starting point of these traditions is the style of the Qurʾān itself; the motif of “rebuttal” in the traditions reflects the polemical style which the Qurʾān uses when attacking its opponents. Often such polemical statements in the Qurʾān open with the imperative form “Say!” This type of verse (see also Watt and Bell 1970: 75–7) contains God’s answer to a question addressed to Muḥammad or a statement, a provocative declaration, or an act (usually on the part of polytheists). This very common Qurʾānic literary structure was the fertile soil on which grew the many traditions of the “occasion of revelation” type, which constitute a significant element in the conception of the multi-stage, continuous revelation of the Qurʾān. As their name implies, such traditions consist of a typical answering formula: “Then God revealed the verse” in reaction to a certain event, situation, question, etc. In a broader context the concept of the piecemeal revelation of the Qurʾān has played a major role in shaping a view of human history in its entirety. Revelation in this view is not limited to the Islamic sphere, but encompasses the entire universe, as we have seen in some traditions in which the revelation of the Qurʾān is seen as part of a continuous cosmic event that has affected the course of human history (“and when God wanted to cause something to happen on earth He sent down parts of it”), as a result of God’s desire to cause certain events to happen in the history of all peoples.

As part of the concept of the piecemeal revelation some traditions highlight the difference between the way in which the Qurʾān and previous scriptures were revealed. The different modes of revelation are to be found in traditions of the “occasion of revelation” type, whose justification is Q 25:32–3. In these traditions the prophet is described as engaged in a debate with the Jews or with his polytheist opponents from the Meccan tribe of Quraysh, concerning the Qurʾān’s mode of revelation. Again and again it is emphasized that the Qurʾān was revealed in segments, in contrast to the books of the Jews and Christians, which were sent down in their entirety in a single revelation (see also Wansbrough 1977: 36). Thus, for example, it is related in the name of Ibn ‘Abbās that when the Jews saw that the Qurʾān was being revealed in segments, they asked: “Why was the Qurʾān not revealed to him in one utterance as the Torah was revealed to Moses, the Gospels to Jesus and the Book of Psalms to David?” It was in response to what they said that God revealed Q 25:32–3: “And the infidels said: ‘Why was the Qurʾān not revealed to him in one utterance?’ This [We have done] in order to strengthen with it your heart” (al-Qurṭubī 1987: XIII, 28; see also Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1997: VIII, 2689–90). Another tradition quotes the non-believing members of the tribe Quraysh as uttering blasphemous words and expressions of doubt in the prophet’s veracity, due to the fact that revelation came to him piecemeal and not all at once. Ibn ‘Abbās says in this tradition that the polytheists in Mecca said: “If Muḥammad is a prophet, as he claims to be, why does his Lord punish him and not reveal the Qurʾān to him in one utterance, instead of sending down to him a single verse, or two verses, or a single chapter (*sūra*) at a time?” Then God revealed Q 25:33 (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1997: VIII, 2689).

Most later Muslim scholars adopted these views of the early traditions and discussed the possible logic in the divine decision to reveal the Qurʾān piecemeal in contrast to Jewish and Christian scripture. Their discussions reflect a concern lest this mode of revelation may be construed as a drawback or defect in the Qurʾān. However, they hasten to clarify that this supposed defect is, in fact, an expression of God's grace toward the prophet and his nation and an indication of the prophet's merit and the merit of the Islamic nation over that of all others. The gradual revelation of the Qurʾān, they explain, made it easier to learn and accept, unlike the other scriptures, which were not easy for their people to accept. As an example these later scholars bring the Jews whose Torah was revealed to them "in one utterance" and which they considered to be quite difficult to accept. In fact they rejected it until God forced it upon them (al-Suyūṭī 1991: I, 94).

Some Muslim scholars tried to find a common denominator between all scripture. According to their view the Jewish and Christian scriptures were revealed in the same manner as the Qurʾān, namely in segments and at different times (see al-Suyūṭī 1991: I, 93–4). Indeed, this argument does have a basis in Jewish sources, as pointed out by Wansbrough, who mentions a Mishnaic parallel to the Muslim idea of piecemeal revelation: "The Torah was revealed scroll by scroll" (see Wansbrough 1977: 37).

The Distinction Between the Actual Qurʾān and the Heavenly Qurʾān

Early Muslims stressed the Qurʾān's divine origin and nature and praised its mode of revelation in comparison to that of previous scriptures, but they made a distinction between the heavenly Qurʾān and the actual, "earthly" text possessed by the believers. In fact, they considered the Qurʾānic text in their possession, known as the "ʿUthmānic codex," as "flawed" and incomplete. The ʿUthmānic codex was compiled and fixed, according to the most commonly accepted view in Islamic tradition, thirty years after Muḥammad's death. The codex was compiled and edited on the orders of the third caliph, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 35/656). The task of compilation was given to the companion Zayd b. Thābit (d. 45/663–4), who served as the prophet's "scribe of revelations."

The distinction between the two versions of the Qurʾān, one in heaven and the other the ʿUthmānic codex, is made quite clearly in a group of traditions dealing with the history of the Qurʾānic text, which describe the way Qurʾānic revelations were compiled into a complete version of the Qurʾān in the prophet's lifetime. According to these traditions the various revelations were brought together toward the end of the period of prophetic activity, and the task of putting together the entire book was completed after considerable time had elapsed. The process began with the formulation of an annual version of revelations in the month of Ramaḍān, and ended with the formulation of a final and complete version not long before Muḥammad's death (cf. Burton 1977: 192–5). The annual and final versions are described in a pair of mutually complementary traditions, both from Ibn ʿAbbās. One tradition reports on the formulation of the annual version, stressing the status of Ramaḍān as the month of revelation (based on Q 2:185): "God has sent down the Qurʾān throughout the entire year. When the month of

Ramaḍān arrived Gabriel compared the Qurʾānic revelations with the prophet, and then God abrogated what was meant to be abrogated, wrote down what was meant to be written down, gave a decision on what was meant to be decided, and caused to abandon what was meant to be abandoned” (Ibn al-Ḍurays 1987: 75; see also ‘Abd al-Razzāq 1983: XI, 338; Ibn Ḥajar 1959: IX, 43). The second tradition goes on to describe the way in which the final version of the Qurʾān was fixed. In it Ibn ‘Abbās says: “The prophet recited the book before Gabriel every year in the month of Ramaḍān, and in the month in which he died he recited it before him twice” (*‘arḍatayni*; see Ibn Abī Shayba 1989: VII, 204; Ibn Ḥajar 1959: IX, 43). The term “reciting the Qurʾān twice” means compiling all the Qurʾānic revelations into a complete and final version. In other words, these traditions claim that toward the end of the prophet’s life a special act of revelation occurred in which a final and complete version of the Qurʾān was created. The terms “recite” (*‘arḍ*) and “recital” (*‘arḍa*) which are here used in the context of the compilation of the Qurʾān during the prophet’s lifetime are taken from the domain of learning the Qurʾān. They refer to the custom whereby a Qurʾānic scholar recites the entire Qurʾān from beginning to end a number of times before a more senior scholar. (For examples of this custom, see Ibn Abī Shayba 1989: VII, 203; Abū ‘Ubayd 1995: II, 191; for the meaning of the term *‘arḍ* as referring to a critical recital of the Qurʾānic text, see also Melchert 2000: 11.) This kind of critical recital, which had become customary among Muslims, thus became the model for the description of how the Qurʾānic version was compiled in the prophet’s lifetime. It also explains why the act of recital according to these traditions was performed by the prophet, with the angel Gabriel playing the role of superior authority.

However, the final version of the Qurʾān, critically reviewed by the angel of revelation, was not destined to become the text possessed by the believers, to wit the official canonical version edited according to accepted tradition in the days of the caliph ‘Uthmān by the companion of the prophet, Zayd b. Thābit. Rather, branching traditions created a continuous link between the intact revealed version dating from the times of the prophet and the “pre-‘Uthmānic” version of the companion ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652–3), a highly respected early Islamic personality and an unimpeachable authority on the Qurʾān. The claim that ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd’s version is identical to the original revealed text is articulated in Kufan traditions according to which ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd was actually present when the final version of the Qurʾān was revealed to the prophet. In one such tradition Ibn ‘Abbās says: “The Qurʾān was recited before the prophet every year once, in the month of Ramaḍān, until the year in which he died. Then it was recited before him twice, in the presence of ‘Abd Allāh, who witnessed the abrogations and amendments made in it” (Ibn Abī Shayba 1989: VII, 204). Another Kufan tradition goes so far as to reject the notion that the authority of Ibn Mas‘ūd’s version was ever replaced by that of a “second” version, an allusion to the ‘Uthmānic codex. In this tradition Ibn ‘Abbās is quoted as asking: “Which of the two versions do you consider to be the first?” When he was told that ‘Abd Allāh’s version was the first, he replied: “No. Indeed, this is the later version.” This tradition ends by saying that ‘Abd Allāh witnessed the abrogations and amendments made in the revealed version from the times of the prophet (Ibn Ḥanbal 1895: I, 362; Burton 1977: 195).

These traditions thus posit an opposition between Ibn Mas‘ūd’s pre-‘Uthmānic complete version with its stamp of revelation, and the ‘Uthmānic codex, here referred to indirectly as the “other” version. In another tradition the latter is explicitly called “the version of Zayd,” an expression referring to the ‘Uthmānic codex (see also Burton 1977: 194), so called after Zayd b. Thābit. According to this tradition the question asked by Ibn ‘Abbās was: “Which of the two versions do you consider to be the later?” and the answer he received was: “The version of Zayd.” To this Ibn ‘Abbās replied: “No, the prophet recited the Qur’ān before Gabriel every year, and in the year of his death he recited it before him twice. Therefore, Ibn Mas‘ūd’s version is the later” (al-Ḥākim al-Nisābūrī 1990: II, 250; see also Burton 1977: 195).

The motivation behind these mainly Kufan traditions is quite clear: their aim is to replace the ‘Uthmānic codex with an alternative version of the Qur’ān, namely Ibn Mas‘ūd’s, which represented the original and authentic text going back to the days of the prophet. Surprisingly enough this position, which casts doubt on the ‘Uthmānic codex’s reliability and sacredness, was not rejected out of hand. Indeed, it was accepted by certain circles at the early stages of Islam, who went so far as to disseminate a tradition in which the prophet himself appears to undermine the status of the ‘Uthmānic codex as representing the pure revealed text. The prophet is quoted as saying: “Whosoever wishes to read the Qur’ān pure as when it was revealed, let him read the version of Ibn Umm ‘Abd,” i.e., Ibn Mas‘ūd’s version (Ibn Abī Shayba 1989: VII, 184; Abū ‘Ubayd 1995: II, 209; Burton 1977: 193).

Kufan preference for ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd’s version as the only authentic Qur’ānic text sanctioned by revelation was accompanied by strong expressions of disapproval toward Zayd b. Thābit, who was considered unfit to compile and edit the Qur’ān, both because he was younger than Ibn Mas‘ūd and because of his humble origins (see also Goldziher 1920: 10; cf. Jeffery 1937: 20; Lecker 1997: 261–2). The traditions in question point out that Ibn Mas‘ūd had learned seventy or more chapters of the Qur’ān from the prophet when Zayd b. Thābit was still a boy with two sidelocks, or even just a seed in the loins of his infidel father. Thus, in one tradition, it is related that ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd gave a sermon in which he said: “I learned from the mouth of the prophet seventy-some *sūras* when Zayd b. Thābit was still a youth with two sidelocks and played with the youngsters” (Ibn Ḥanbal 1895: I, 411). In another tradition Zayd is not mentioned by name but ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd is reported to have asked: “Why don’t you read [the Qur’ān] according to the version of so-and-so?” to which he answered: “I recited seventy *sūras* before the prophet and he told me I did well, at a time when the one whose version you would like me to recite was still a seed in the loins of an infidel” (Ibn Shabba 1979: III, 1006). The sharpest expression of opposition to Zayd b. Thābit and the version of the Qur’ān which he edited is to be found in a single tradition in which Ibn Mas‘ūd rejects the ‘Uthmānic codex because of Zayd’s Jewish origins. According to this tradition ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd was asked: “Do you not read [the Qur’ān] according to Zayd’s version?” to which he answered: “Why should I have anything to do with Zayd or his version? I learned seventy *sūras* from the prophet when Zayd was still a Jew with two sidelocks” (Ibn Shabba 1979: III, 1008; Lecker 1997: 260).

The opposition to Zayd b. Thābit was not to defend Ibn Mas‘ūd’s prestige among Muslims against that of Zayd, but rather to point out that there exists an alternative version of the Qur’ān, more complete and earlier than the ‘Uthmānic codex, in the form of Ibn Mas‘ūd’s version. The claim in the pro-Ibn Mas‘ūd traditions that the ‘Uthmānic codex is incomplete is based on what canonical traditions say concerning how the Qur’ān was compiled. These traditions, known by the name of “the collection of the Qur’ān” (*jam‘ al-Qur’ān*), have been analyzed extensively, by Nöldeke (1909–38: II, 11–27, 47–62; cf. Burton 1977: 141–2, 225–40) and many subsequent scholars, who attempted to reconstruct the history of the Qur’ānic text using the available materials. According to these traditions, when Muḥammad died, no complete, compiled, and edited version of the Qur’ān was in existence; instead there were only scattered revelations, some of which had been put in writing but most were only remembered by heart. A typical feature of these traditions is the chronological gap between the prophet’s lifetime and the period in which the Qur’ānic text was compiled, and the exclusion of the prophet from the compilation and the editing of the Qur’ān (see Burton 1977: 126–7, 230–40). As a result, doubt has been cast on the authenticity of the codex and its integrity. It would therefore appear that it was these traditions which paved the way to the formation of the Kufan traditions whose aim was to present an earlier version of the Qur’ān, dating back to the days of the prophet himself, a version which was later rejected and replaced by another one, i.e., the ‘Uthmānic codex.

The claim that the version of the Qur’ān which is in the actual possession of Muslims is incomplete and even flawed can be found in a related group of traditions in which specific arguments against the Qur’ān’s completeness are advanced. The basic claim of these traditions is that certain verses which had been part of the Qur’ān were later lost or omitted. These “lost verses” contained laws, sayings, ethical teachings, and merits of the prophet which do not appear in the version possessed by the believers. Occasionally we meet with the claim that entire paragraphs are missing, without any details being given as to their content, merely as an abstract argument against the book’s completeness. The terms used in these traditions to refer to the loss of a verse are: “raised to heaven” (*rufi‘a*), a term which minimizes the damage to the book’s integrity since the verse was abrogated by the will of God; a second term used in the connection is “omitted” (*usqīta*), which implies purposeful erasure. The charge of omitting parts of the Qur’ān is occasionally leveled at the caliph ‘Uthmān. Western scholars have cast doubt on the veracity of these traditions, or have demonstrated that the verses in question could not have been part of the Qur’ān (see Nöldeke 1909–38: I, 255; Watt and Bell 1970: 54–5; Burton 1990: 49, 54).

The dominant tendency in Islamic tradition to ascribe incompleteness and flaws to the Qur’ān is contradicted by a pair of traditions preserved in Ibn Shabba’s (d. 262/876) *Ta’rīkh al-madīna al-munawwara*, although they do not represent the commonly accepted Muslim account of how the ‘Uthmānic codex came into being. One of these traditions, with a Basran–Kufan chain of transmission, quotes ‘Abd Allāh b. Zubayr (d. 73/692) as claiming that the prophet had written down the entire Qur’ān on scrolls (*ṣuḥuf*), which were then used by ‘Uthmān for creating the official version of the Qur’ān. Ibn Zubayr relates that since in that caliph’s time different versions of Qur’ānic texts abounded

(a very common motif in traditions about ʿUthmān’s compilation, which provides the motivation behind the creation of a single, uniform text), ʿUthmān collected the “pre-ʿUthmānic” versions and sent Ibn Zubayr to ʿĀʾisha, Muḥammad’s wife. “I brought [from ʿĀʾisha] the scrolls in which the prophet had written the Qurʾān,” relates Ibn Zubayr, “and, after we read them and polished them, ʿUthmān commanded that the other versions be torn up.” The second tradition claims that the entire Qurʾān was written down on parchment from the mouth of the prophet. This tradition possesses a Syrian chain of transmission and quotes a person by the name of Abū Muḥammad al-Qurashī as saying that ʿUthmān had written to the provinces that in order to prevent disputes about the text of the Qurʾān he had asked ʿĀʾisha to send him the parchment “on which is to be found the Qurʾān that was written down from the mouth of the prophet when God revealed it to Gabriel and Gabriel revealed it to Muḥammad. And it (i.e., the text) was pure.” After that ʿUthmān gave the task of editing the Qurʾān to Zayd b. Thābit and other scribes from Medina (Ibn Shabba 1979: III, 997–8).

These solitary traditions with their tendency to link the ʿUthmānic text to the prophet and to stress the chain of revelation of the text (Allāh → Gabriel → Muḥammad) prove that in early Islam there were those who wanted to represent the actual text possessed by Muslims as identical with the complete, pure, divine original. However, this trend did not win widespread acceptance. Instead, preference was given to the tendency to present the Qurʾānic texts as incomplete. This is the trend that is reflected in the traditions according to which the earlier and more authentic version was the one preserved by Ibn Masʿūd, and in the traditions of the “collection of the Qurʾān” type and their attendant claims about omitted verses.

From these latter kinds of tradition, taken together, we can conclude that in early Islam the believers considered the Qurʾān which they possessed to be an incomplete version to which additions were possible. For this reason early Muslims granted the status of Qurʾānic revelation to various laws, sayings, ethical teachings, and merits of the prophet which they believed were worthy of being part of the Qurʾān (cf. Burton 1977: 225–40). This approach then affected how “collection” traditions and traditions about specific omissions from the text were formulated. It seems that there was a sense among early Muslims that the Qurʾān was lacking some necessary elements, and as a result the boundary between what were actual Qurʾānic verses and what were utterances which deserved to be in the Qurʾān became blurred. The sense of incompleteness is most clearly seen in the formulation of the Kufan traditions which ascribe antiquity, completeness, and authenticity to Ibn Masʿūd’s version. These traditions, too, challenge the ʿUthmānic version of the Qurʾān and, in fact, present Ibn Masʿūd’s “pre-ʿUthmānic” version as the ideal Qurʾān. Traditions dealing with variant readings of the Qurʾān go as far as claiming that the ʿUthmānic text is also in need of linguistic and semantic corrections. In fact, they even claim that the ʿUthmānic version contains texts which should not be in it; according to these traditions Ibn Masʿūd omitted *sūrat al-fātiḥa* and *sūras* 113 and 114 from his version (see Nöldeke 1909–38: II, 34–5; Jeffery 1937: 21; see also Madigan 2001: 36). Both this view and the approach denying the completeness of the Qurʾān can be said to express a kind of early “textual criticism” of the Qurʾān.

It did not take long, however, before a reaction set in to the claim that Ibn Mas‘ūd’s version was superior to the ‘Uthmānic codex, whose sacredness and unique status were being undermined. As part of a description of the revelation in which the final version of the Qur’ān was fixed in the prophet’s lifetime, the Kufan ‘Ubayda b. ‘Amr (d. 74/693) is quoted as saying that the version recited to the prophet in the year in which he died is the version which the people read today (Ibn Abī Shayba 1989: VII, 204). Other traditions do express doubt as to the precise identity of the final version which was revealed to the prophet at the end of his life, but in any case they tend to identify that version with the ‘Uthmānic codex, clearly with the intention of protecting its sacredness. Thus, for example, the Basran Muḥammad b. Sīrīn (d. 110/728) says that in the year of the prophet’s death Gabriel recited the Qur’ān before the prophet twice “and I hope that our reading [the ‘Uthmānic version] is identical with the final recital” (Ibn Sa‘d 1957: II, 195; see also Ibn Shabba 1979: III, 994).

A substantial change in attitude toward the Qur’ānic text occurred during the subsequent centuries. Later Muslim scholars rejected the position taken by earlier generations concerning the ‘Uthmānic text and insisted that the latter is, in fact, identical with the prophet’s text. Al-Baghawī (d. 510/1117), for example, claims that the ‘Uthmānic codex is “the final recital” read to Muḥammad before his death, and that this recital was witnessed by no other than Zayd b. Thābit, and not by Ibn Mas‘ūd. “It is said that Zayd b. Thābit witnessed the final recital, in which it was made clear what was abrogated and what was allowed to stand,” says al-Baghawī, adding that the “final recital” is the text as it was written by the prophet and recited by him to Zayd b. Thābit. This written version of the Qur’ān was, so he claimed, the one used in public readings of the Qur’ān until the prophet’s death (see al-Suyūṭī 1991: I, 110). Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) also takes a stand definitely in favor of the ‘Uthmānic codex, but unlike al-Baghawī he ascribes the fixing of the Qur’ānic text which the believers possess to God alone. According to him, God collected the Qur’ān and established the order of its chapters and in the year of the prophet’s death Gabriel taught him twice how to read it. “No one but God collected it,” adds Ibn Ḥazm (1987: VI, 266). Although they differ from each other, both Ibn Ḥazm and al-Baghawī represent, each in his own way, the attempts of later Muslim scholars to remove the faults and drawbacks which earlier Muslims had found in the Qur’ānic text that they possessed, to wit the ‘Uthmānic codex. Their intent was to represent this text as the pure and complete revealed version of the Qur’ān, *contra* traditions which viewed Ibn Mas‘ūd’s version as superior (see also Goldziher 1920: 10), as well as “collection” traditions whose descriptions of the history of the ‘Uthmānic codex opened the door to aspersions on its authenticity and sacredness.

Later Muslim scholars usually took great care when faced with the difficulties posed by such traditions not to reject overtly and out of hand ancient traditions whose authenticity was considered beyond doubt. Instead, they looked for ways to settle the difficulties they presented. Thus, al-Baghawī circumvented the difficulty by creating a harmonizing link between the canonical “collection” traditions and the traditions which report the creation of a final version of the Qur’ān in the lifetime of the prophet. Ibn Ḥazm, however, did not hesitate to reject the “collection” traditions outright. A third approach to the ‘Uthmānic codex is represented by the scholar Ibn Ḥajar

(d. 852/1449), who refrained, here as elsewhere, from casting doubt on the authenticity of the traditions in question. He does not reject the claim of a continuous link between the final revealed version of the Qurʾān in the prophet's lifetime and the pre-ʿUthmānic version of Ibn Masʿūd, but he tries to find an identical link also between the version made in the prophet's lifetime and the ʿUthmānic codex. He points out that it is possible to combine the “two final recitals” (the “two recitals” of the Qurʾān in the prophet's final year) and to maintain that one is in fact the version of Ibn Masʿūd and the other that of Zayd (Ibn Ḥajar 1959: IX, 45).

When we compare the approaches of earlier and later Muslims we find that the two groups differ with respect to their views as to the quality of the Qurʾānic text which they possessed. Earlier Muslims tended to the view that the Qurʾānic text was incomplete and flawed. In fact, they considered the ʿUthmānic text inferior to Ibn Masʿūd's “pre-ʿUthmānic” version. Later Muslim scholars, in contrast, represent the ʿUthmānic codex as a pure text of revelation, written entirely in the prophet's lifetime. True, this view can be found already in early times, as in the traditions preserved in Ibn Shabba quoted above, but at the time it remained in the margins of Islamic tradition.

The difference in the views of earlier and later Muslims reflects changing attitudes toward the text of the Qurʾān during the first centuries of Islam and provides us with a glimpse into the complex and gradual process by which the Qurʾān developed into a sanctified text, perfect and flawless. Early comments on the Qurʾān's incompleteness and flaws were later replaced by a diametrically opposed approach that accepts without question the actual text possessed by the believers. This approach of later Muslim scholars, which views the extant text as complete and authentic, has not only replaced the other, earlier view, but has in fact come to represent the view which the Muslim community deems normative with respect to its holy scripture.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 11

Written Transmission

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While English uses the same word for both a manuscript of the Qurʾān (*a Qurʾān*) and the revelation (*the Qurʾān*), Arabic distinguishes between the two; a copy of the Qurʾān is commonly known as a *muṣḥaf*.¹ Far from being fortuitous, this precise distinction demonstrates the simultaneous existence of two realities: transmission in written form and transmission in spoken form. Islam strongly emphasizes the oral nature of the Qurʾān and the particular importance of this feature should not be overlooked (Graham 1987). The role of the written word cannot, however, be ignored. Calligraphy is traditionally held in high esteem, particularly in relation to the Qurʾān, and the *muṣḥafs* hold a special place in Muslim piety; indeed, the Muslim tradition of writing down the Qurʾān largely reflects a suspicion that oral transmissions may not be entirely accurate. Furthermore, as will become evident, the development of the Qurʾān in manuscript form during the first four centuries of Islam focused upon progressively perfecting the notation, indicating without a doubt that this was of great importance to the community.

The Qurʾān is the most copied text in the Islamic world. Until printing began to play a part in the distribution of texts in the nineteenth century, transcriptions were completed by hand. There are, therefore, a considerable number of manuscripts of the Qurʾān in existence across the world, most of which are very late in date. Which period do the earliest copies date from? Copies of the Qurʾān, linked to prominent figures from the beginnings of Islam, have been identified: several have notably been associated with the caliph ʿUthmān (who ruled from 23–35/644–55). These attributions appear in a colophon,² a note, or even a tradition. In the city of Istanbul alone, there are no fewer

than six copies of the Qurʾān, all more or less complete, which fall into this category.³ However, historians are not convinced by any of these manuscripts (al-Munajjid 1972), some of which show signs of being very poor forgeries. Recently, some of them have been published in facsimile and the editor, Tayyar Altıkulaç, was able to demonstrate that they exhibited textual features which did not conform with the information about the *muṣḥaf* of ʿUthmān transmitted by the Muslim tradition. It is, therefore, impossible to use them to better our understanding of the written transmission of the Qurʾān. The earliest copies which can be dated or which have been dated using reliable evidence are known to originate from the second quarter of the third/ninth century. What is known about the preceding era? Do any sections of Qurʾān manuscripts remain from the first two centuries after the *hijra*?

The First Qurʾān Manuscripts

According to the classical Muslim tradition, written transcriptions of the Qurʾān began in the 20s/640s, upon the instruction of the caliph Abū Bakr and then ʿUthmān, to guarantee the survival and integrity of the Qurʾān. In fact, copies have been preserved which date from the second half of the first/seventh century; none of these copies is complete and, in many cases, only fragments remain. Identification of these documents was not based on direct dating in the form of a colophon, however. Instead, a range of clues from different sources were applied, such as codicology (the study of the materials used and the history of the manuscript codex), palaeography (the study of ancient writing), and philology. In recent years, a series of carbon-14 datings have been made and, although the results are always to be interpreted in conjunction with the other clues, they strengthen the chronology of the early copies. In terms of codicology, parchment has been used to write on in the vast majority of cases, with a few fragments being copied onto papyrus, as documented by Grohmann (1958). However, the limited scope of the latter makes it impossible to determine whether they are the remains of codices⁴ which once contained the entire text of the Qurʾān or whether they are extracts, copied out perhaps by pupils or to be carried as an amulet. It is useful to note that paper was not produced in the Islamic world until after 132/750, with the earliest paper transcriptions of the Qurʾān dating from the fourth/tenth century.

These early manuscripts are normally written in vertical format, their size ranging from large quarto to small octavo, but a few oblong copies which could be attributed to the second half of the first/seventh century have been found. The early *muṣḥafs* have almost no outer margins, the script almost reaching the edges of the page. In terms of palaeography, writing is of the Arabic *ḥijāzī*⁵-type script, which was succinctly defined by an Arabic author from the fourth/tenth century (Ibn al-Nadīm 1970). The script shares striking similarities with that used in letters and documents written in Arabic dating from the first/seventh century. However, the script does vary considerably between manuscripts and in cases where two copyists have collaborated on a *muṣḥaf*, their individual styles can easily be identified. This is notably the case with the Codex

Parisino-petropolitanus transcribed by five different hands. These differences are due to a lack of script standardization, something which did not happen until sometime later during the Umayyad dynasty (after 65/685). Finally, in terms of philology, the orthography of these early copies is very distinctive: it is defective in the sense that certain long vowels recorded in Classical Arabic do not feature systematically in its “consonant skeleton” or *rasm*: thus the verb *qāla* (“He said”), which is now spelt *qāf+alif+lām*, appears as *qāf+lām*, like the second person singular imperative form of the same verb, *qul* (“Say!”). Conversely, some words like *shayʾ* or *āyat* may contain an “additional” letter in comparison with the current orthography. There is some hesitancy in the notation of the *hamza*. As is the case for the script, the Codex Parisino-petropolitanus shows that there may be slight differences in the orthography associated with each copyist. Two additional comments are relevant to these observations. First, the use of diacritics,⁶ which are used with varying frequency by the copyists of the *ḥijāzī*-style manuscripts: did they make this choice themselves or were they following orders from their patrons? The purpose of the decision itself is also unclear. Was it to leave open the possibility of reading the text in different ways, thus perhaps having the potential to suit greater numbers of Muslim users/readers? Second, there was no system in place at this time for recording short vowels. The various deficiencies noted in the *ḥijāzī*-style manuscripts mean that it was not, in fact, possible to adequately preserve the integrity of the Qurʾān through writing as the caliph ʿUthmān intended when, according to the tradition, he decided to document the revelation.

The *ḥijāzī*-style manuscripts nevertheless confirm that transmission of the Qurʾān in writing began at an early stage. Various trends in that transmission have also been identified. Muslims initially chose the *codex*, a type of book which became the predominant format of the day, all but replacing the scroll or *volumen*⁷ of classical antiquity, which remained in very restricted use, as, for example, in copies of the Torah. A slightly later text, a polemical Christian piece against Islam, does, however, indicate that scrolls were used by the first Muslims following the Jewish example (al-Kindī 1885).

Scrolls were subsequently used from time to time, but based upon a very different set of principles from the classic *volumen*; this will be discussed later in this chapter. Traditions mention various materials upon which texts were written (scraps of leather, palm leaf stalks, animal scapula bones, etc.), none of which remained in use for very long, having been replaced by the codex.

Manuscripts were copied out in long lines, not columns, from the start, a decision which proved to be a determining factor in the subsequent development of the Arabic-Muslim manuscript tradition (see facsimiles published in Déroche and Noja 1998, 2001). The spaces between words cannot be differentiated from the spaces that occur within words, where the word contains one or more letters which are not linked to the following letter, as with *dāl*, which does not join to the following letter when used within a word; this may be an indication that the writing was influenced by the *scriptio continua* style used during antiquity.⁸ This influence may also explain why copyists would often divide a word comprising two or more segments (four, for example, in *darajāt*: *da+ra+jā+t*) upon reaching the end of the line, a practice which was later strictly forbidden.

With the exception of the Sanaa Palimpsest, a unique witness of a Qurʾānic text stemming from another handwritten transmission, the text found in the early copies broadly conforms with the canonical *rasm*. Actually, as the short vowels are not recorded and the use of diacritical marks is very limited, only *rasm* variants and specific divisions of verses can be observed. As for the former, it should be noted that the manuscripts do not always conform with a single set of variants ascribed by the tradition to one of the *maṣāḥif al-amṣār* (regionally variant texts), but they may combine them. In addition to those canonical variants, others can be found in the manuscripts: it is difficult to decide whether they are scribal mistakes or unrecorded variants.

The ends of the verses are very consistently indicated by ink strokes which are grouped together in various arrangements; markers to indicate the conclusion of five or ten verses, where they occur in the manuscripts at all, have been added in later. The study of copies like the Codex Parisino-petropolitanus or London BL Or. 2165 shows that the verse divisions do not coincide with those recorded for the regional schools (Spitaler 1935). It may be that in some cases divisions reflecting an earlier stage of the text were kept during this first phase of the handwritten transmission, providing glimpses into a possible editorial process. The status of the *basmala* is disputed: in the Codex Parisino-petropolitanus, some of the copyists put a verse ending mark after it, others did not.

The *sūras* are separated from one another by blank spaces which are a whole line long in some of the more meticulously transcribed copies; the titles of the *sūras* which are sometimes included have been added later. In the case of a few *muṣḥafs*, the title area was decorated with ink, sometimes in shades of red, but this seems to correspond to a slightly later phase. Some manuscripts leave a whole line for the introductory *basmala*, but this practice was not unanimously adopted. The tradition of dividing the text into sections of equal length does not seem to have been adopted during this period when copies of the Qurʾān were transcribed using the *ḥijāzī* script; in the London BL Or. 2165 manuscript, markers for such divisions of the text were inserted later and are thus found between the lines (Déroche and Noja 2001). Since the beginning and end of the manuscripts were exposed to continual wear and tear and repetitive handling, the pages have often disappeared at these points. We therefore know next to nothing about “title pages” since only one such initial page has been found to date and this is merely a fragment, the recto of which is blank.

Experimentation During the First Centuries

Some of the features which characterized the Qurʾān manuscripts of the first/seventh century have stood the test of time, but the majority were subject to significant change over the following three to four centuries, their pace being especially quick during the Umayyad period. In fact, far from retaining the solutions demonstrated by the earliest copies, a desire to perfect the codex form quickly emerged among the Muslim community. This is reflected partly by the greater degree of accuracy adopted in transcriptions of the text: techniques essential to attaining ʿUthmān’s alleged

objectives were gradually introduced. The initial *scriptio defectiva* script was replaced by *scriptio plena* – a development which may possibly be documented in one account that tells of an Umayyad governor adding two thousand *ḥarfs* (probably meaning “letters”) to the Qurʾān (Jeffery 1937). The first vocalization system then emerged, probably around the end of the first/seventh century and was based on the use of red dots (Déroche 2014); gradually *hamza* and orthoepic indicators (*sukūn*, *shadda*) were marked down, albeit irregularly. The system as we know it today seems to have been introduced towards the end of the third/ninth century.

Considerable effort went into the appearance of a *muṣḥaf*. The script itself was subject to a process of ensuring uniformity, perhaps inspired by the efforts of the Umayyad officials: the caliphs of this period initiated reforms in the administration of the empire with the aim of establishing the Arabic language and script as official forms of communication. In the case of the script, this required considerable care to be taken over handwriting, perhaps influencing those who were assigned the task of transcribing the text of the revelation. The notion of Qurʾānic scripts, that is, specific styles adopted in copies of the Qurʾān, undoubtedly emerged during this period; the *Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadīm shows that, by the fourth/tenth century, the notion of a Qurʾān script was standard (Ibn al-Nadīm 1970). The first composed script to appear in a significant number of manuscripts by various copyists, *OI*, dates from the end of the first/seventh century and is essentially an elaborate form of the early *ḥijāzī* script, retaining the same slender appearance; the script is written mainly on vertical format codices. Its size is very constant in spite of the variety of the dimensions of the copies and it is usually associated with wider margins. All this suggests that some teaching and control was introduced at that moment which may be considered as the starting point of the Islamic calligraphic tradition (Déroche 2014). Perhaps under the influence of this development, scripts retaining a more genuine *ḥijāzī* aspect, but following some sort of model, also appear to have spread among copyists working perhaps for more traditional circles; margins are however present as in the more calligraphic copies.

A further development of this period was the inclusion of decoration in the Qurʾān codex. The most impressive example is a copy of the Qurʾān discovered in Sanaa in the Yemen. A further development of this period was the inclusion of decoration in the Qurʾān codex, roughly coinciding with the introduction of *OI*. The most impressive example is a slightly later folio copy of the Qurʾān discovered in Sanaa (Dār al-Makhṭūʿāt 20-33.1), with an initial double-spread page depicting two buildings, assumed to be mosques (von Bothmer 1987). The manuscript is thought to date from the reign of al-Walid I on the basis of a C-14 dating between 657 and 690 corrected by the art-historical analysis of the illumination (von Bothmer, Ohlig, and Puin 1999). Other fragments from the Umayyad period reveal that the illuminators who worked on these manuscripts were familiar with Christian iconography and with the iconography of the type most spectacularly displayed at the Dome of the Rock. Other, less skillful attempts may reflect the approach adopted in milieux which were further away from the court or more conservative. Living beings are absent from these illuminations, which instead feature geometric designs and vegetation-based imagery alongside occasional architectural images. The decoration mainly occurs where there is a break in the text, either

within the block of writing itself or at the edge. The latter category also includes full-page decorations placed at the start and sometimes also at the end of a volume, as well as decorative borders at the beginning and end of the text, and even throughout the entire manuscript.

The Qurʾān codex underwent significant alteration during the second/eighth century, the vertical format being superseded by the oblong format. The reasons behind this modification have not been recorded in any existing documentation and thus several hypotheses have been proposed; two of these theories are very similar and are not necessarily mutually exclusive: according to the first, the decision indicates a desire to clearly distinguish the Qurʾān from the Christian codex and from the Jewish Torah scrolls. The second theory considers this modification to relate to the initial writing down of the *ḥadīth* and the resultant desire to distinguish the Book of God from all other texts. It is also possible that a particular type of binding would have been developed around this time or shortly after: this would have been a closable case, serving both to protect the Qurʾān codex and to provide a means of identifying the document within. Together with the materials it contained, this case would have provided the *muṣḥaf* with a strong visual identity.

It may be that the search for bigger *muṣḥafs*, illustrated by the Sanaa copy DaM 20-33.1, led to the development of scripts featuring thicker strokes. They are traditionally known as “Kufic” scripts and more recently as “early ‘Abbāsīd scripts” (Déroche 1983, 1992), but as the earliest examples can now be attributed to the Umayyad period this denomination should be used in a more precise way. As a whole, these scripts are defined by their thick lettering, as mentioned above, with emphasis being placed on the baseline; the copyists used pronounced horizontal strokes to create a balanced layout, punctuated by shorter vertical strokes and identical spacing between groups of letters. These traits developed over the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. On the basis of the classifications proposed, it is possible for the paleographer to identify the rules of working practice in operation for certain groups of copies (Déroche 1989). The complexity of the most remarkable of these scripts, primarily associated with parchment manuscripts of oblong format, demonstrates the various levels of execution in existence, ranging from copies written in calligraphy to more clumsy attempts at imitating these skillful copies.

One consequence of this graphic work was that copyists were able to alter the volume occupied by the text: in fact, the number of pages included in a transcription of the Qurʾān could be markedly augmented, if the copyist so desired, by significantly increasing the dimensions of the characters whilst still maintaining a suitable appearance. Umayyad folio copies like Sanaa DaM 20-33.1 were superseded by plano *muṣḥafs* probably produced under the patronage of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Mahdī. With twelve lines to the page, they could contain between six hundred and a thousand folios, each made from a whole animal skin. Preference then switched to producing series of seven to thirty parts, forming an overall volume of considerable size; the first series was produced during this period, as confirmed by Malik b. Anas’ condemnation of this innovation (Fierro 1992). Given how quickly the number of such series increased during the third/ninth century, it would seem that they were produced to meet

requirements. Each part was relatively close to the average size of contemporary copies, which probably facilitated manufacture. The fact that the parts were produced as series also meant that they had to be kept together in specific cases, a practice which was to remain popular throughout the Muslim world.

From the end of the third/ninth century, a new development began to take place: a script very different in appearance from the early ‘Abbāsīd scripts began to appear in copies of the Qur’ān. This “new style,”⁹ despite many variations in its appearance, is defined by breaks and angular forms and by extreme contrasts between the thick and thin strokes (Déroche 1983, 1992). The script was initially used in administrative and legal documents; it replaced earlier scripts, yet there is no satisfactory explanation for its apparent success. It is possible that it was easier to read than the early ‘Abbāsīd scripts, which differ greatly from current writing practice. Economic factors may also have played a part: one cannot fail to acknowledge the relatively simultaneous occurrence of both the “new style” being introduced and the use of paper spreading throughout the Muslim world; the decrease in the price of books triggered by the introduction of this new material seems to have led to an increase in demand. As a result, it would probably have been essential to raise productivity levels. Earlier scripts would therefore have been abandoned either because they took too long to produce or because increasing numbers of copyists (who likely had not mastered these particular scripts or who could not produce them to an acceptable level) would have been required to transcribe the Qur’ān; they would therefore have chosen simpler styles for these copies. During this same era, the vertical format gradually re-established itself as standard in these *muṣḥafs*; this was perhaps another consequence of paper being introduced. The “new style” was the last script to spread throughout the Muslim world before the introduction of printing; it remained in use until the seventh/thirteenth century, at which point it was restricted to titles only.

Around the middle of the fourth/tenth century, one final development led to scripts similar to those used in everyday life being adopted in the Qur’ān. The strong visual identity assigned to the *muṣḥaf* by previous generations was reduced. Instead, the overall presentation remained constant for several centuries, with the notable exception of the decorations, which changed in style over time.

Written Copies of the Qur’ān from the Fifth/Eleventh Century Onwards

The text of the Qur’ān was copied out both in parts in order to form a collection of extracts, and in its entirety; in the majority of cases these copies take the form of a codex written in vertical format, but copies have also been made for specific purposes, usually for use as a talisman, and are produced in scroll form (*rotulus*¹⁰ type), shirts, etc. The codices comprise either one complete volume or a series of parts, ranging from two to sixty sections. These divisions into parts are based on the number of letters which form the entire text as a result of an initiative that dates back to the Umayyad period and was allegedly ordered by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714); the number found then was divided

by two, three, four, and so on, and the end of the nearest verse is taken to be the way-point which was at the half, third, or quarter (and so on) point.

The modern reader opening a manuscript of the Qurʾān cannot fail to be struck by the lack of a title at the beginning of the volume, especially given that titles have featured at the beginning of works, even taking up a full page on occasion, since the very start of the non-Qurʾān-related Arabic manuscript tradition. The *muṣḥaf* is thus an exception to the rule. Many strategies have therefore been adopted to compensate for the absence of a title. As discussed above, developing a strong, instantly recognizable visual identity was one of the first steps taken to compensate for this deficiency. In the most meticulously transcribed copies, illuminations were used for this purpose. The original decorations had no writing (anepigraph); later, pious expressions or a list of the sections which comprise the Qurʾān (*sūras*, verses, letters, etc.) were included. At the end of the fourth/tenth century, quotations from the Qurʾān were introduced: the citations chosen contain the word “*Qurʾān*” or another such direct reference to the text. Verses 77–80 of *sūra* 56 were undoubtedly the most frequently used in this context, but other sections were also used, such as Q 17:88, 41:41–2, and 85:21–2. The size of the decoration affected the artist’s decision regarding the length of the quotation: the illumination marking the start of a volume and relating to the citation can form one page, a double-page spread, a border surrounding the *incipit* (the first words of a text), or a separate prelude to the *incipit*.

The double page which contains the *incipit* is characterized by a very particular text layout. In copies of the Qurʾān comprising one volume, *sūra* 1 or *sūra* 1 and the first verses of *sūra* 2 are arranged in a particular way; the carefully produced copies include an illumination at this point which takes the form of a border and contains one or several of these quotations from the Qurʾān. Each *sūra* is preceded by its title, which may be followed by the number of verses it contains and its place in the revelation; it is much less common for an indication of its position in the chronology of the revelation to appear (that is, whether it is a Meccan or a Medinan chapter). The *sūras* are identified by title, not by number; the titles can vary from manuscript to manuscript. The *basmala* which is featured at the beginning of each *sūra* (with the exception of *sūra* 9) appears on its own on the first line. Verses are usually separated from one another by a marker or small decoration; it is rare for their number in the sequence to appear. Larger illuminations, placed either at the end of the verse concerned or in the marginal area, with the corresponding decoration, mark groups of five or ten verses; the number, if included, is written either all in letters or using the numerical value of the letters of the alphabet (*abjad*); in the more modest copies, the words “five” (*khams*) and “ten” (*ashr*) are written in the margin. The numbering of each of these elements is placed at its end.

A series of additional markers are also featured in the margin. The prostrations which must occur when reading/reciting the text are indicated by the word *sajda*, which appears either on its own or as part of a decoration. Segments of the text are also indicated in the margin: thirtieths (*juzʿ*), sixtieths (*ḥizb*), and also, on occasion, further subdivisions of these sections into quarters and halves. Some of the more meticulous copies contain borders in the form of illuminations to mark these points in the text; usually there is just one, at the halfway point, but sometimes there are thirty, one for each *juzʿ*.

The text itself is normally written all in the same ink for both the consonant skeleton (*rasm*) and vocalization system; only in the Muslim West was the early system of using color to mark the short vowels, *hamzas*, *sukūns*, and *shaddas* retained. Despite objections from jurists, gilded ink was used, sometimes throughout the text, sometimes for certain words, most notably “Allāh”; different colors of ink appear in some copies according to the specific page layout. Where the *muṣḥafs* contain translations written between the lines for the benefit of non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, these take the form of smaller and distinct characters, often written in red ink. In some copies, symbols above the text clarify the rules of recitation, indicating in particular where pauses must and must not occur. From this period onwards, the between-word space was larger than the space which separated individual, non-joining letters within a word; splitting a word at the end of a line was no longer acceptable.

In the eastern part of the Islamic world, the styles of writing employed were primarily the *naskhī*, *muḥaqqaq*, *rayḥānī*, and on rarer occasions the *thuluth* script, to use traditional terminology. The latter three scripts are of medium and large stature, while the first – which was in very widespread use – is small, though still larger than the *ghubār* script, employed in miniature copies. In practice, there are evident stylistic variations which relate to different periods and locations; our knowledge of this is, however, largely empirical. There exist a great many copies written in calligraphy, most of which use the same script from start to finish. During the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries, copyists sometimes chose to employ two or even three styles of different height with two or three lines in taller script (*muḥaqqaq* or *thuluth*) separated from the others by blocks of *naskhī* script; the latter were transcribed in black ink, the others in color or gold. There are also regional particularities: this will be discussed in greater detail below.

Some manuscripts also contain additional appended texts, invocations (*duʿāʾ*) to be recited after reading the Qurʾān, tables for predicting the future with the aid of the text, tracts relating to the Qurʾān, etc. Individuals would sometimes note down particular family events (births and deaths) or larger-scale events in their copies.

The bindings of the Qurʾān are the same as those of other manuscripts, having a book jacket and jacket flaps (except in Central Asia). The outside of the jacket flap often bears an inscription of verse 79 of *sūra* 56 (“None but the pure may touch”), thus enabling the manuscript to be identified as a *muṣḥaf*. Special tracts state that copies of the Qurʾān must be treated with particular respect; they must be placed above all other books which are stored flat in accordance with Eastern tradition. It is also recommended that the *muṣḥaf* be kept in a protective cover. Many coverings of this type remain; the leather covers of sub-Saharan Africa are particularly important in that they prevent the leaves of the manuscript from dispersing.

Up until the fourth/tenth century, regional characteristics do not seem to have strongly influenced the Qurʾān manuscript tradition, aside, of course, from the variant readings. The situation changed with the introduction of so-called “cursive” scripts in copies of the revelation. In the Western part of the Muslim world (North Africa and Spain), the *maghribī*¹¹ script gradually established itself as the norm from the end of the fourth/tenth century and remained so until the arrival of the computer age. Parchment

continued to be used in the production of these manuscripts, which were typically square in format. Colors (red, green, yellow, and blue) were also employed over a long period to indicate vocalization and orthoepic markers. In sub-Saharan Africa, a variant form of *maghribī* developed; as mentioned above, these copies of the Qurʾān sometimes comprised a pile of separate sheets which had to be kept together with their binding in a special protective pouch.

Elsewhere, differences between the various scripts were less clearly defined. There were many variants of the classic styles from the central area of the Muslim world, as demonstrated by copies of the Qurʾān made in China (Bayani, Contadini, and Stanley 1999). More distinct is the *bihārī* script, which was used solely in the north of India between the seventh/thirteenth and tenth/sixteenth centuries. *Muṣḥafs* written in the *nastʿālīq* script are comparatively rare since this style, so characteristic of the Persian world, does not have Qurʾān-script status. The illuminations often bear the mark of the region where they were completed.

The Qurʾān Manuscripts in Muslim Societies

The alleged etymological similarities between the words “Qurʾān” and the Syriac *qeryana* (liturgical reading) could lead one to conclude that the book of the Qurʾān was intended for liturgical purposes; however, this was not the case and manuscripts of the Qurʾān played no part in the religious practice established by Muḥammad who, let us not forget, died before the text was recorded in writing, according to Muslim tradition. This is not to say that the Qurʾān is never associated with devout practices. Indeed, the energy which went into multiplying copies of the book and the considerable effort invested in some of the more lavish and impressive copies indicate that the *muṣḥaf* did play a part in Muslim societies. On the other hand, developments in notation during the first centuries undoubtedly influenced the emergence of the variant readings. Unfortunately, very little is known about these different issues and studies into the matter are only just beginning.

It is important to emphasize that manuscripts of the Qurʾān are held in great esteem; this also applies to the printed versions. The basic interpretation of the verse of *sūra* 56 mentioned above is that the *muṣḥaf* may only be touched by those in a state of purity. This applies to Muslims only and prohibits non-Muslims from touching a copy of the Qurʾān. When a copy deteriorated to such an extent that it could no longer be used, Muslim law proposed various methods of protecting such copies from desecration (Sadan 1986); deposits of old manuscripts discovered in various locations across the Muslim world represent one solution to this problem. Worn pages could also be transformed into cardboard for use as a cover in binding another copy of the Qurʾān.

Scholars also discussed the way in which the copies of the Qurʾān containing mistakes should be handled. Many instances of corrections in manuscripts suggest that some people were reading them carefully.

According to the tradition, the history of the Qurʾān manuscripts began in earnest with the decision of the caliph ʿUthmān to send four or seven copies of the text, produced

on his command, to the major cities in his empire. The significance of dispatching these *muṣḥafs* during the manuscript period is difficult to determine due to a lack of figures. A similar scheme promoted by al-Hajjāj b. Yūsuf is said to have taken place under the reign of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik. Later, the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Mahdī sent huge copies of the Qur’ān to major cities of his empire. Since it would have been too costly for most Muslims to purchase a manuscript, copies of the Qur’ān were held in mortmain or *waqf* in order to make them accessible to as many people as possible. Copies have been preserved from the third/ninth century which contain a deed recording such a gift made by a devout believer to a mosque or oratory; these copies frequently took the form of a series of thirty *juz’*. More is known about the history of these copies intended for public use than about the *muṣḥafs* which belonged to individuals. Later documents only, from the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries, have established that the Qur’ān was the only book possessed by most households (Anastassiadou 1999). Even then, this information relates primarily to urban areas; it is not known whether Muslims living in rural areas had access to copies of the text of the revelation during this same period. The price of the books seems to have fallen significantly as soon as paper became widely established in around the fourth/tenth century, though it is not possible to quantify this change; more is known about a second development – the spread of printing – which occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century and enabled more people to acquire a copy of the Qur’ān.

A great many pocket-sized copies of the Qur’ān have been preserved, dating from the eleventh/seventeenth century. The Ottoman world provides the best example of this development. A standard format was developed which linked the material composition of the manuscript with the structure of the text. Each *juz’* comprised a quire of ten leaves so that these copies all had three hundred leaves in total (usually a bit more, in fact); the text of each *juz’* was divided into twenty fixed sections, each corresponding to one copied page with fifteen lines per page, starting with the beginning of a verse and finishing with the end of a verse (Stanley 2004; Witkam 2002). As a result, it is theoretically possible to swap two pages bearing the same pagination from two different *muṣḥafs*, produced in accordance with these rules, without omitting or duplicating any of the text. Subsequent elaboration of the text enabled the presentation to be used for specific purposes: to highlight a certain element of the text, to demonstrate the sacrality of the Qur’ān, or even to suggest a deeper significance. The most striking examples are revealed by a group of manuscripts in which copyists have stretched out or compressed the script within the closed unit of each page in order to move words or groups of words so that they appear on the same line and in the same relative position as on the page opposite, where similar techniques have been applied; these words are written in red to highlight the textual symmetry, the most impressive examples of which appear in *sūra* 26 where whole passages resemble one another in this way (Déroche 2000; Stanley 2004).

Were these standardized copies intended to facilitate learning the Qur’ān by heart (Stanley 2004)? While this cannot be ruled out completely, what we know of the methods used would seem to suggest otherwise. The extensive standardization process demonstrated by these *muṣḥafs* and the impressive productivity of the Ottoman copyists

indicate that the aim of these manuscripts was to respond to a very widespread demand within society, while at the same time taking into account the limited resources of potential purchasers; the influence of printing or at least what the Muslim copyists knew about printing may also have played a part in this development.

Reading the text is an act of piety and the development of the *waqf* for the *muṣḥafs*, as we have seen, provided the literate with the opportunity to read the Qurʾān in mosques or in other religious buildings. According to an early source, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf arranged readings of the copy he had sent to Medina on Thursdays and Fridays. From the sixth/twelfth century onwards, rituals emerged which involved reading the Qurʾān aloud, requiring the use of copies of the Qurʾān in thirty volumes. Income from a *waqf* enabled the readers and any staff associated with this ritual to be paid; several examples have been identified in preserved manuscripts and in the *waqf* acts themselves dating most notably from the Mamluk period (James 1988). These readings sometimes took place at a burial site to benefit the deceased; at other times, they were dedicated to believers within a mosque or even to passers-by in neighboring streets. Readings were also held under more modest conditions. Sessions were organized during the month of Ramaḍān; copies of the Qurʾān from the Maghreb region contain special markers in the margin for this purpose, dividing the text into twenty-nine sections to match the number of days in the month.

Readings were sometimes focused upon particular extracts. During the seventh/fourteenth century, Ibn Baṭṭūta (d. 770/1368–9 or 779/1377; 1992) assisted at a gathering held daily in Tabriz in the courtyard of the mosque. During this gathering, which was following the *ʿaṣr*¹² prayer, *sūras* 36, 48, and 78 were read. There can be no doubt that the development of this practice explains the emergence of copies featuring just these *sūras*, as well as certain others from the end of the Qurʾān. These thin volumes also enabled the less affluent to obtain a partial copy of the scripture at a lower cost. These copies seem to belong to a category of manuscripts intended for private use in the same way as those copies bearing either a *juzʿ* or a *ḥizb* on each double page (i.e., the verso of one leaf and recto of the following); a very small script is used. This latter type of *muṣḥaf* seems to have been highly successful in the Iranian world and in India; extracts, on the other hand, may have been more popular in Turkish-speaking areas, but they were also found in India, in the Malay world, and among Morisco communities of the Iberian Peninsula.

For non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, certain copies contained a translation written in smaller characters between the lines of the Arabic text, following the order of the Arabic word for word. In the Iberian Peninsula, however, Muslims in the tenth/sixteenth century used translations (in a variant of Spanish) which were very close to a translation in the modern sense. Others provided a commentary (*tafsīr*) written in the margin, sometimes in the form of a translation. It is, of course, essential to distinguish those copies in which the elements in question are later additions from those where the copyist intended them to be inserted. The earliest examples in Persian date from the sixth/twelfth century, while those in Turkish postdate them by almost two centuries. In more recent times, the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries, such copies seem to have increased in number.

Copies associated with the memory of some of the great figures of early Islam hold a special place in the evocation of piety that developed around the *muṣḥaf*. From the fifth/eleventh century onwards, sources identify a “Qur’ān of ‘Uthmān” or a “Qur’ān of ‘Alī” at specific sites and describe the practices which surrounded them (Mouton 1993). The presumed absolute authenticity of these copies as well as their *baraka* explains why reading from these copies carried particular value, with believers seeking to establish physical contact with the manuscript; copies were sometimes protected by a cover or stored in a cabinet. In Cordoba where several leaves from such a copy were stored for a time, an elaborate ritual developed involving processions and candles; the relic was then transferred to Marrakech where it was protected with a silver-plated binding and stored in a special piece of furniture.

In Damascus, where a “Qur’ān of ‘Uthmān” was held in the Middle Ages, important figures were entitled to read the manuscript and to contribute to the funds raised for the weaving of the veil which covered it. Copies of the Qur’ān were also integrated into strategies devised to demonstrate power. One such example is the ‘Abbāsīd court ceremonial where, on special occasions, the caliph would appear seated on his throne with a copy of the Qur’ān, wearing a cloak and carrying a baton which are both said to have belonged to Muḥammad. The large parchment copies of the Qur’ān mentioned above, which were also made during this period, were very expensive to produce and costs could only be met by important figures. In the third/ninth century, three Turkish officers serving the ‘Abbāsīd caliphs donated three such copies of the Qur’ān comprising thirty *juz*. These copies were intended to be seen even before being read; they reflected the central character of the revelation as well as the gesture made by the donators and their position within the community. This tradition of producing large copies of the Qur’ān continued through the ages. The development of paper manufacturing techniques enabled even larger copies to be created, since parchment copies were restricted to the size of the animal skin used. Two examples reveal that the format of the manuscripts was considered important by the princes: the largest Qur’ān offered to al-Aqsā mosque in Jerusalem was a gift from the Mamluk sultan Barsbāy (ruled 825/1422 to 841/1438); according to another tale, Timur scorned a miniature *muṣḥaf* made for him by one calligrapher but subsequently walked to the door of his palace to accept willingly another copy produced by the same artist which was so large it had to be transported by cart (Huart 1908). Just as the etiquette of the chancery dictated that the sovereigns’ letters be written in large format, so the copies of the Qur’ān they commissioned had to reflect the special requirements of their rank. Manuscripts of the Qur’ān were also readily given as presents by one sovereign to another, although they were not necessarily of such large proportions.

Copies which can be described as scholarly editions have also been identified; their more modest appearance suggests that they had no ceremonial function. They provide the reader with a text containing markers that refer to the variant readings (*qirā’āt*): this information is not normally included since any given *muṣḥaf* is limited, in principle, to following one reading. These “erudite” copies also often contained short tracts on the technical aspects, such as the different ways of dividing the Qur’ānic text and the relative chronological positioning of the *sūras* within the text of the revelation

(Bobzin 1995; Bayani et al. 1999). Such information would only have been of interest to specialists in the field, whether they were engaged in teaching or learning.

From Printed Editions to the Qurʾān Online

Printed copies of the Qurʾān originated in the West where printing with movable type was introduced towards the middle of the fifteenth century. The first attempt at printing this Arabic text took place in Venice in around 1537 or 1538. The Paganini Press printed a copy of the Qurʾān which was probably intended for sale in the East but contained so many errors that the print run was destroyed; only one copy has been preserved (Nuovo 1987). This episode occurred shortly before the first translation of the Qurʾān was published in Basel in 1543; this was a copy of an old translation completed by Robert of Ketton (Bobzin 1995). The end of the seventeenth century saw the emergence of two editions of the Qurʾān, in addition to several works containing extracts of various lengths (Bobzin 2002); the edition produced by the pastor Abraham Hinckelmann in Hamburg in 1694 contained only the Arabic text, while that published by Italian priest Ludovico Maracci in Padua in 1698 was accompanied by a translation and detailed commentary. These various editions demonstrate the development of Arabic studies in Europe. However, they were not suitable for a Muslim readership as they did not adhere to the specific rules governing the orthography of the Qurʾān and did not follow any one of the variant readings in a coherent manner.

In 1787 in Saint Petersburg, the first Qurʾān to be printed by a Muslim, Mullāh ʿUthmān Ismāʿīl, was published, intended for fellow Muslims. It preceded the first Kazan editions (from 1803) by several years, which themselves pre-dated editions published in the East from the first half of the nineteenth century: Tehran (from 1244/1828), Shiraz (1830?), Calcutta (1831), Serampore (1833), Tabriz (1248/1833), and so forth. These editions were lithographs, a process that enabled distinctive traits of Qurʾānic manuscripts to be retained which the earlier letterpress copies from the West had disregarded. When letterpress editions are produced in Muslim countries, they will only be accepted if additional efforts are made within this long-standing tradition of written transmission to respect the traditional layout of the text, including even its catchwords.¹³ In the first half of the nineteenth century, Gustav Flügel published an edition of the Qurʾān in 1834 in Leipzig; this became an important date in the history of Arabic-Islamic studies in Europe. Despite its faults (dividing up the verses and failing to follow any one set of variant readings), this edition nevertheless provided a large number of readers with access to a reliable text; Western scientific studies referred to its verse numbering for a long time thereafter. Some years later, Flügel published a concordance of the Qurʾān which was an invaluable contribution to Islamic studies.

The most significant event remains, however, the publication of an edition of the Qurʾān in Cairo in 1342/1924 which was the result of a long preparation process by scholars from al-Azhar; these scholars focused upon one variant reading, that of Ḥaḥḥ ʿan ʿĀṣim (Bergsträsser 1930). The text was based on the oral aspect of transmission, possibly aided by technical texts on recitation, the variant readings (*qirāʾāt*), and so forth.

Early manuscripts of the Qurʾān were not taken into account, but then few experts at this time were aware of the existence of the *ḥijāzī* style. This edition gained widespread popularity across the Muslim world and gradually replaced the Flügel edition among academic researchers. In fact, this one reading eventually began to dominate over all other ones, with the result that this text can be considered something of a vulgate, without ever having been officially sanctioned except by the *shaykhs* of al-Azhar in Cairo.

The possibilities offered by analogue disks and tapes have been exploited for making recordings of traditional recitations. In Cairo at the beginning of the 1960s, the supreme authority of al-Azhar made a recording of the entire text; there can be no doubt that this initiative influenced the Islamic world. Indeed, it may well have prepared the way for information technologies and computer-based techniques. As these techniques spread, the Qurʾān discovered a new medium and new possibilities which traditional methods of transmission had failed to offer. The text became available on CD-ROM; such storage capacity enables access to a translation, commentary, or recitation along with the passage being displayed on the screen in Arabic. It is also possible to conduct research into the recorded texts. Similarly, this method has been used to provide access to the text of the earliest copies of the Qurʾān in order to facilitate research into the history of the text (Déroche and Noja 1998, 2001).

The Internet offers similar possibilities, with websites fulfilling the same function. The text can be consulted along with a translation or commentary; Internet users can even choose between different recitations. These developments have triggered discussion among Muslims consulting these Internet resources; the immateriality of the various different electronic versions may well tie in with the concerns over purity expressed in verse 79 of *sūra* 56, yet Q 96:4 (“God instructs man by means of the pens”) raises questions over the position of this new medium in relation to the revelation.

Notes

- 1 The plural form in Arabic is *maṣāḥif*. However, for the sake of simplicity, the plural form *muṣḥafs* will be used here.
- 2 Text, generally found at the end of a manuscript, in which the copyist records details of his identity and his work: his name, the date, the location, his sponsor, etc. are all details which the copyist may (or may not) choose to include. Fake colophons may be added to an existing manuscript or may accompany a copy, causing it to be considered a forgery.
- 3 These are the manuscripts from Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı HS 194, A 1, EH 1 and YY 749 (formerly 4567), and the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, MSS 457 and 553.
- 4 Singular form: codex; type of book made from sheets folded in half and assembled in one or several quires which are then stitched along the length of the fold.
- 5 Literally: “from Ḥijāz,” a region to the northwest of the Arabian Peninsula where the towns of Mecca and Medina are situated.
- 6 These marks are placed in varying quantities above or below certain letters to identify homographs; an unmarked set of characters within a word can have five, even six different meanings. This ambiguity is eradicated if the copyist has taken care to mark down all diacritics correctly.

- 7 Roll on which a text is written in columns of the same width, perpendicular to the direction of rolling.
- 8 Letters of the text were written next to each other, with no significant spaces left between words.
- 9 Also known as Eastern or Persian Kufic, Naskhi Kufic, or broken cursive.
- 10 A scroll on which the text is written in lines, parallel to the direction of rolling. On some scrolls of the Qurʾān, the text is arranged so as to resemble various forms or figures.
- 11 Script specific to the Muslim West or Maghreb region.
- 12 One of the five daily prayers which takes place in the middle of the afternoon.
- 13 In a manuscript, the first word written on the recto of one leaf is repeated at the bottom of the verso of the preceding leaf; this process helps to keep pages of the manuscript in the correct order.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 12

Context: Muḥammad

Herbert Berg

For many scholars the connections between Muḥammad and the Qurʾān are so obvious and intimate that they need no examination. For Muslims, the passages of the Qurʾān were revealed at specific times and places, and though they are understood to be “eternal,” they were relevant to the situation of Muḥammad and his community in Mecca and Medina. Furthermore, Muḥammad, as God’s chosen messenger, best understood the Qurʾān and best exemplified its teachings. Therefore, the context of the Qurʾān is the life of Muḥammad. Even for many secular scholars,¹ because they claim that the biography of Muḥammad was produced much later, the Qurʾān serves as the sole trustworthy source for gleaning details of Muḥammad’s biography. Most of the important and critical moments in Muḥammad’s life are addressed or alluded to within the Qurʾān. Consequently, to understand Muḥammad you must understand the Qurʾān, and vice versa. While the trust in the extant sources varies, Muslim and most secular scholars, it will be seen, largely agree on the intimate nature of the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qurʾān.

This intimacy is seemingly supported by a wealth of material. The Qurʾān addresses itself directly to the “messenger,” at times even using the name “Muḥammad.” The biography of Muḥammad, the *sīra*, not only provides a context for many revelations, but also describes the process of revelation – particularly for the first revelation. Naturally, the *sunna* of the prophet, the conduct or example of Muḥammad, also contains many *ḥadīths* (reports) in which Muḥammad references the Qurʾān. As well, there is a genre of *ḥadīths* known as the *asbāb al-nuzūl* that purport to provide the exact circumstances under which specific revelations came to Muḥammad. Furthermore, some *ḥadīths* also

contain Muḥammad's own exegesis of the Qur'ān (*tafsīr*). Thus, to raise doubts about Muḥammad's relationship with the Qur'ān is considered absurd by many scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

While this chapter will not dispute that the figure of Muḥammad and the text of the Qur'ān are intimately connected, it will suggest that the nature of that connection may be much more complex than either the traditional Muslim view (that sees Muḥammad as the pure vessel through which God conveyed His message to the rest of humanity) or the more secular view (that usually sees Muḥammad as the conscious or unconscious source of the revelations). A third, far more skeptical view presents a radically different understanding of the connection between Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. In all cases, however, the way one views that connection dictates – and is dictated by – one's basic approach to the sources, that is, to what extent (or even, whether) the purportedly historical material is to be trusted. Thus, what all these scholars, the most traditional Muslim, the most sanguine secular, and the most skeptical secular, share is that their arguments seem circular to those who disagree with them.

To navigate through these complexities, I will examine what the Qur'ān and early Muslim sources such as the *sīra* say about the process of revelation of the Qur'ān to Muḥammad, what the Qur'ān specifically says about Muḥammad, and then what Muḥammad says about the Qur'ān. This will lead to a discussion of Muḥammad's role in the production of the Qur'ān, particularly the various theories proposed by some secular scholars. Finally, the nature of the connection will be re-examined in light of more radical scholarship on the Qur'ān and on Muḥammad. It will be impossible to discuss all the research and hypotheses developed about Muḥammad and the Qur'ān in the last 1,400 years (or even the last 100 years). Therefore, I will select only a few typical representatives from each of the three major approaches, but they will adequately highlight the methodologies involved and the obstacles encountered in trying to make a definitive statement about the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qur'ān.

The Revelation(s) of the Qur'ān to Muḥammad

There are two ways of approaching the subject of how revelations of the Qur'ān came to Muḥammad. While the Muslim understanding and the secular scholarly theories differ somewhat, ultimately they are not that different in their approach and sources, and so their descriptions are not as divergent as it first appears.

The formulation of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) is an example of a typical Muslim account. This approach takes into account material from the Qur'ān, the *sunna*, and the *sīra*, and attempts to create a consistent whole out of them. Al-Suyūṭī states that the Qur'ān was revealed in two phases. In the first, it descended from the preserved tablet (*lawḥ al-mahfūz*) to the lowest heavens on the night of power (*laylat al-qadr*). From there it was revealed to Muḥammad via Gabriel in stages starting in 610 CE and ending shortly before his death in 632 (al-Suyūṭī 1951: I, 89–92). This explains or harmonizes passages such as Q 17:106, 25:32, 76:23, and 87:6–7 with 2:185 and 97:1–5.

As for the means of revelation, this oft-cited *ḥadīth* explains:

‘Ā’isha related that al-Ḥārith b. Hishām asked the messenger of God, “Messenger of God, how does the revelation (*wahy*) come to you?” The Messenger of God replied, “Sometimes it comes like the ringing of a bell; it is the hardest on me. Then it passes from me after I have grasped what it said. Sometimes the angel appears to me as a man. He speaks to me and I grasp what he says.” (al-Bukhārī 1987: I, 58–9, no. 2)

The *ḥadīth* concurs with the various processes of revelation that seem to be outlined in Q 42:51: “It is not fitting for a man that God should speak to him except by *wahy*, or from behind a veil, or by the sending of a messenger to reveal (*yūḥiyā*), with His permission what He wills.” The *sunna* and *sīra* consistently identify the “messenger” as Gabriel, and this conforms to Q 2:97, “Gabriel...brings down the [revelation] to your heart by God’s will.”

The accounts of the first revelation provide the longest description of the revelation process. The information comes primarily from the biography of Muḥammad as recorded in al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *Ta’rīkh* and the *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) (both of which, especially the latter, rely on the accounts transmitted by Ibn Ishāq [d. 150/767]). These accounts are, at first glance, quite straightforward, but far more complex upon closer examination.

Muḥammad was forty (or forty-three) when he received his first revelation. He is said to have engaged in an annual devotional practice that involved remaining for a month in a cave on nearby Mt. Ḥirā’. On one such occasion in the year 610 CE, the angel Gabriel appeared and said, “Muḥammad, recite (*iqra’*)!” Muḥammad replied, “I cannot recite (or read).” Gabriel repeats his command and Muḥammad repeats that he is unable to read. Then, Gabriel accosts Muḥammad and again repeats, “Muḥammad, recite!” Now, Muḥammad responds, “What shall I recite?” With this, the first passage from the Qur’ān is revealed:

Recite in the name of the Lord who creates. He creates man from a clot of blood. Recite: And you Lord is the Most Bountiful, He who teaches by the pen, teaches man what he knew not. (Q 96:1–5)

When Muḥammad recited it, Gabriel left.

According to the most detailed account of this event, Muḥammad had this vision while he was asleep, for after Gabriel’s departure, he woke up. Therefore, this vision seems to have been a dream, but one which left the recited words “written on his heart.” In the more detailed version of al-Ṭabarī (1879–1901: I, 1147–56), Muḥammad feared the experience, thinking that he might be a poet or a man possessed by *jinn* (i.e., a madman). And, since he despised these, he considered throwing himself down the mountain. But he was reassured by a voice from heaven, “Muḥammad you are the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel.” He looked up and saw Gabriel in the form of a man with his feet on the horizon. This encounter was apparently not convincing, since Muḥammad later told Khadīja his wife that he was either a poet or a madman, and remained anxious until reassured that he was not by his wife’s Christian cousin,

Waraqā. An alternate version of the first revelation states that after coming down from Mt. Ḥirāʾ, Muḥammad heard a voice calling him but could see nothing. Terror-stricken, he returned to Khadija who wrapped him in a cloak. Then “O you enveloped in your cloak, rise and warn!” (Q 74:1) was revealed to him. According to al-Suyūṭī (1951: I, 52–3), others claim that *Sūrat al-faṭṭha* was revealed first, and yet others that it was the *basmala*.

W. Montgomery Watt, who would be a representative of a secularist view on these matters, accepts much of this account. He suggests, however, that originally Muḥammad thought his visions to be of God, not Gabriel – a view that contradicts orthodox Muslim teaching. Citing the visions in Q 53:1–18, which contains the sentence “And suggested to his servant,” Watt argues that “his servant” must mean “God’s servant,” not “Gabriel’s servant,” and the grammar of the whole passage confirms his reading. Gabriel, Watt points out, is not even mentioned in the Qurʾān until Medinan passages. Following Richard Bell, he also suggests that *iqraʾ* and *Qurʾān* come from the Syriac *qeryāna*, which denotes reciting sacred texts and came to mean “read” only later, perhaps in an effort to prove that Muḥammad was illiterate and thus that the Qurʾān was a miracle (Watt 1953: 46).²

Watt also accepts that Muḥammad was afraid, for “[t]he fear of the near approach of the Divine has deep roots in Semitic consciousness” (Watt 1953: 51). Muḥammad’s despair is also “real information about Muḥammad,” though his purported thoughts of suicide seem unlikely (Watt 1953: 50). Watt concludes:

There is thus much uncertainty about the circumstances surrounding Muḥammad’s call. Yet careful sifting of the earliest traditions leads to a general picture in which we may have a fair degree of confidence, even though many details, and especially the relative dates of the different features, must remain somewhat uncertain. (Watt 1953: 52)

As for the means of revelation in general, Watt again sifts the Qurʾān and *ḥadīths* to ascertain a general picture. Using Q 42:51 as an (auto)biographical and partially chronological account of Muḥammad’s prophetic experience, Watt (again following Bell) suggests that *wahy* in this passage does not mean direct verbal communication or that Muḥammad heard the passages. Rather they were suggested, prompted, or inspired, which was the work of the spirit (mentioned in Q 26:192–4). The method accords with the first description given in the *ḥadīth* related by ʿĀʾisha. However, the second method, speaking from behind a veil, suggests a voice is heard, but there is no vision. The third method, which involves a messenger, accords with the second description given in the *ḥadīth* related by ʿĀʾisha. That “man” of course came to be understood as Gabriel. Watt suggests this method involved both a voice and a vision. From his reading of the Qurʾān, Watt states that the first method was common in the Meccan period and the third in the Medinan period (though this later conception was read back onto earlier passages).

Thus the critical, but ultimately sanguine approach of which Watt is just one of many representatives suggests that the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qurʾān is very close: Muḥammad’s “prophetic consciousness” can be understood as (1) entirely of divine origin (the Muslim position), (2) as a part of Muḥammad’s personality of

which he was not conscious (the secular position), or (3) “the work of Divine activity, but produced through the personality of Muḥammad” (the tolerant Christian position) (Watt 1953: 53). In each case, Muḥammad is intimately involved in the revelation of the Qurʾān. Thus, while Watt and al-Suyūfī would obviously disagree on the source of the “prophetic consciousness,” ultimately if they both believe the truth is to be found within the textual sources, then it is hardly surprising that that “truth” is so similar.

The Qurʾān on Muḥammad

The close relationship between Muḥammad and the Qurʾān seems to be confirmed when one reads the Qurʾān. Although direct references to Muḥammad in the Qurʾān are very few, that is, his name is used only four times, five times if one includes the variation Aḥmad – Q 3:144, 33:40, 47:2, 48:29, and 61:6, respectively – there are about two hundred references to “the messenger” in the Qurʾān and about thirty to “the prophet.” Thus, a significant portion of the Qurʾān is devoted to defining and defending Muḥammad’s position and authority and some addressed directly to Muḥammad.

Watt points out that there is a development in what the Qurʾān says about Muḥammad. He is first conceived of as a warner (*nadhīr*) in Meccan passages, with one of the earliest passages telling Muḥammad to “rise and warn” (Q 74:2; Watt 1953: 71). Muḥammad is also described as a messenger (*rasūl*), one in a long line of messengers sent by God. The term *nabī*, or prophet, however, was likely introduced later through Muslim contacts with Jews in Medina since the term is used primarily for prophets of the Jewish and Christian traditions of whom Muḥammad is a continuation (Watt and Bell 1970: 28–9). In another Meccan passage (Q 88:21–2) the Qurʾān states that Muḥammad is an admonisher, not one who has control over people. Once in Medina, the Qurʾān refers to Muḥammad’s authority, telling believers to obey God and his messenger (Q 3:32, 3:132, 4:13, 4:59, 4:64, 4:69, 5:92, 8:20, 8:46, and 9:71). Even more strongly stated is “Whoever obeys the messenger, obeys God” (Q 4:80). Muḥammad is also a judge: “We have sent down the book to you in truth so that you can judge between the people on the basis of what God has shown you” (Q 4:105; Watt and Bell 1970: 29).

Even from these few examples, it certainly seems that the biography of Muḥammad had a significant impact on the content of the Qurʾān. At times, the Qurʾān’s rulings even appear to fit nicely with the desires of Muḥammad, such as Muḥammad’s wives being divinely reprimanded (Q 66:3–5) or permission for a man to marry the divorced wife of an adopted son, thus allowing Muḥammad to marry Zaynab, the divorced wife of Zayd b. Ḥāritha (Q 33:37). However, a more general example of the Qurʾān’s response to events surrounding Muḥammad can be seen in the opposition Muḥammad faced before the *hijra*. The Qurʾān repeatedly declares that Muḥammad is not a soothsayer (*kāhin*), sorcerer (*sāhir*), possessed (by a *jinn*), or a poet (*shāʿir*) (Q 6:7, 11:7, 15:6, 21:5, 26:27, 26:224, 34:43, 37:15, 37:36, 43:30, 44:14, 46:7, 51:39, 51:52, 52:29–30, 54:2, 54:9, 68:2, 68:51, 69:41–2, 74:24, and 81:22). For Muslim scholars, that these claims were made by the pagan Meccans is obvious. It is referred to in the *sīra*. In fact, the accuser is the enemy of Muḥammad, identified as al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra, who plots

to discredit Muḥammad. He considers all of these accusations, but deems the charge of sorcerer to be most applicable. Then God revealed Q 74:11–25, and concerning the men with him, Q 15:90 (Ibn Hishām n.d.: I, 270–2). Muslim scholars would see this as confirmation of the purpose of serial revelation (that is, its parts were revealed when appropriate). Therefore, Muḥammad’s biography and the circumstances of a revelation are useful tools for understanding the Qur’ān. For Watt, too, this is part of a larger strategy of the Meccans to discredit Muḥammad. The Meccans did not deny the divine source of Muḥammad’s revelations, since each charge suggests a supernatural source for the revelations, but not God as the source (Watt 1953: 127–9). The fact that the Qur’ān describes similar charges being leveled at Moses and Jesus by their enemies (as, for example, in Q 10:76 and 61:6) only shows how even revelations with no mention of Muḥammad are frequently tied to Muḥammad.

What this brief discussion of the Qur’ān’s development of Muḥammad’s authority and the example of the connection between the contents of the Qur’ān and Muḥammad’s life seem to reveal is that the Qur’ān serves as a reliable source for understanding Muḥammad. This position is succinctly stated by Alford T. Welch:

A distinctive feature of the Qur’ān that cannot be ignored if the Muslim scripture is to be understood fully is its close relationship to the life of Muḥammad and his contemporaries.... [T]he Qur’ān is a historical document that reflects the prophetic career of Muḥammad and responds constantly to the specific needs and problems of the emerging Muslim community. It abounds in references and allusions to historical events that occurred during the last twenty or so years of Muḥammad’s lifetime. (Welch 1980a: 626)

Again, the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qur’ān as understood by scholars such as Watt or Welch is not that different than those of Muslim scholars such as al-Suyūṭī. Where they differ is on the source of the Qur’ān: God versus a product of a mystical experience (Watt 1953: 57). However, while certainly more critical and less monolithic in their understanding, the overall conclusions of the scholars differ surprisingly little.

Muḥammad’s Role in Shaping the Qur’ān

Traditional Muslim accounts provide several descriptions of the canonization of the Qur’ān, which can be categorized in two ways. The first suggests that Muḥammad’s successors Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and/or ‘Uthmān ordered the collation and canonization of the Qur’ān. In this way Muḥammad stands apart from the collection process. The second suggests that not only the content, but also the form of the Qur’ān was determined by God. Even the order of the *sūras* was divinely determined. In fact, towards the end of his life Muḥammad is reported to have said that Gabriel came to review the Qur’ān with him once a year, but that year Muḥammad was visited twice by Gabriel, which suggested to him that he would die soon (al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901: I, 1140). Presumably, Muḥammad then essentially left a final version of the Qur’ān behind which later

Muslims needed only to commit to writing and preserve. Several secular scholars agree that Muḥammad had a much more hands-on role in the production of the form and content of the Qurʾān.

Chronology of the *sūras* has long been an important matter for Muslim scholars, particularly for legal and theological reasons. The traditional Muslim dating relied primarily on the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the “occasions of revelation” (see below), and on statements made by later Muslim scholars of the Qurʾān. European scholars have also attempted chronological orders for the Qurʾān. These scholars (e.g., Theodor Nöldeke [1909–38: I, 58–234]), unlike their Muslim counterparts, have examined the internal evidence of the Qurʾān, subjecting it to the scrutiny of historical and literary criticism. This method included using references to *known* public events and the vocabulary and style of the passages in order to date the *sūras*. To give simple illustrations of how these three criteria were used to date passages, we need only look at some of the general distinctions between Meccan and Medinan passages: the *qibla* (that is, direction of prayer) controversy is an event which occurred after Muḥammad’s prophetic claims had been rejected by the Jewish tribes of Medina; the introduction of words such as *muhājir* (that is, emigrant) occurred only after Muḥammad and his Meccan community had emigrated to Medina; and the early Meccan style of short, crisp, poetic revelations gave way to longer, more prosaic passages in Medina, especially in those dealing with the day-to-day rules and regulations of the Muslim community. The results of this approach perhaps not so surprisingly differ only in minor respects from Muslim chronologies. Yet they have won wide acceptance among secular scholars. More skeptical scholars, we shall see, will ask, “How are these *known* events actually known to have occurred?”

The traditional Muslim chronologies and the conventional European ones also share one major flaw; both regard the *sūras* as whole entities (with only a few minor exceptions). Even though some Muslim scholars accept the idea that the Qurʾān was originally revealed only as short pericopes, they then go on to assume that all, or at least most, of the pericopes of one *sūra* were revealed at about the same time.

In the 1930s, Richard Bell set about correcting these particular oversights, thereby developing his own chronology and, with it, a far more complex hypothesis on Muḥammad’s role in constructing the Qurʾān. He began with an exacting analysis of each *sūra* and its dissection into its component parts. Shifts in the grammatical construction, rhyming scheme, or content of a passage were an indication of some sort of discontinuity in the passage. Bell describes part of his process as follows:

[The passages of the Qurʾān] begin by stating their occasion; a question is asked, the unbelievers have said or done something, something has happened, or some situation has arisen. The matter is dealt with shortly, in usually not more than three or four verses; at the end comes a general statement, often about Allah, which rounds off the passage. Once we have caught the lilt of Qurʾān style it becomes fairly easy to separate the surahs into separate pieces of which they have been built up. (Watt and Bell 1970: 73)

This method suggested to Bell that almost all *sūras* originally consisted of numerous separate passages and only rarely was there evidence of a unified composition of any

great length. Even Muslim tradition, which assigns *asbāb al-nuzūl* for passages consisting of only a few verses, seems to suggest that the unit of revelation to Muḥammad was very often quite short. Bell adds that just as there may be no connection of subject between these passages of one *sūra*, so too no connection of time may be assumed.

Bell (1937–9: I, vi) further suggested “that the Qurʾān was in written form when the redactors [Zayd b. Thābit et al.] started their work, whether actually written by Muḥammad himself, as I personally believe, or by others at his dictation.”³ Thus Bell also considered all the possibilities for confusion in written documents, including corrections, interlinear additions, additions on the margin, deletions, substitutions, pieces cut off from a passage and wrongly placed, and unrelated passages written on the back of others but read continuously. It is due to this process (and to the fact that revelations were received on the whole as short pieces that were later put together), rather than confusion in Muḥammad’s (or God’s) thought and style, that resulted in what Bell calls the “dreary welter of the Qurʾān” (Bell 1937–9: I, vi).

Bell also considered content, style, and vocabulary as a guide, recognizing (like Nöldeke) that certain words and phrases belonged to certain periods of teaching or controversy. For instance, Bell made a resolute attempt not to read into any passage or word more than it actually said, setting aside the views of Muslim commentators, which appeared to have been influenced by later theological developments. Bell recognized that once a word had been introduced, it tended to persist. Thus only words and phrases that could be linked to definite events could be used as indications of date. With these techniques alone, Bell would still have been unable to date much of the Qurʾān; he could have only dated a few passages relative to one another, while categorizing the vast majority simply as Meccan or Medinan. However, Bell used one more criterion for dating passages of the Qurʾān – the sequence of ideas in the Qurʾān.

Briefly, this sequence is as follows: Muḥammad’s mission began with the limited purpose of urging the local Meccans to recognize God’s bounties in creation and to worship Him alone. However, the resistance and indifference of the Meccans led to the incorporation of the notion of temporal punishment. With the acquisition of information about the other monotheistic traditions, the idea of eschatological punishment was introduced along with a stricter monotheism. This resistance developed into open opposition and persecution until Muḥammad and his followers emigrated to Medina. Once there, the revelations to Muḥammad also appealed to the People of the Book to accept Muḥammad as a messenger of God. With their opposition came a turning point; the People of the Book were rejected and the religion of *islām*, the surrender to God, was introduced with its accompanying vocabulary (e.g., *ḥanīf*, *muslim*, and so forth). With these major events and ideas as guides, Bell was able to place most passages in and around them.

Thus understood, Bell felt that the Qurʾān must be final authority in all questions regarding Muḥammad. The *sunna* and *sīra* regarding his doings and sayings are so profuse with pious legend that it is impossible to distinguish the historical from the spurious. (Yet, Bell still connected the passages of the Qurʾān with events in Muḥammad’s life – a method which obviously employs the chronological framework of Muḥammad’s life provided by the *sīra*.) The historical authority of the Qurʾān derives from the fact that

for Bell the revelations to Muḥammad were a natural outcome of the culture, mind, and life of Muḥammad, who, given his situation, happened to interpret them as being sent down from God. Bell not only saw the Qurʾān as created by Muḥammad, but also felt Muḥammad had a great deal to do with the compiling and editing of the *sūras*.⁴

Bell argues that the composition of the Qurʾān fell into three main periods:

- 1 an early period from which only fragments survive consisting mainly of lists of “signs” and exhortations to the worship of God;
- 2 the Qurʾān period, covering the latter part of Muḥammad’s activity in Mecca, and the first year or two of his residence in Medina, during which he was attempting to produce a *qurʾān* (that is, a “recitation”) in Arabic containing the gist of previous revelations;
- 3 the Book period, beginning somewhere near the end of the second year in Medina, during which Muḥammad is definitely producing a *kitāb* (that is, a “book” that would be an independent revelation) (Bell 1937–9: I, vi).

W. Montgomery Watt continued much of Bell’s work, including re-editing and adapting Bell’s *Introduction to the Qurʾān* (1970). His analysis of Muḥammad’s biography and “prophetic consciousness” as depicted in the Qurʾān is based on similar principles (even if he disagrees with Bell on some of the details).

As radical as the hypotheses of Bell seem, they still assume the overall historicity of the Muslim account of Muḥammad’s life and the development of the Muslim community. That is to say, scholars such as Bell certainly disagree with the traditional view and present hypotheses that some Muslims might find offensive by suggesting that the illiterate prophet had a hand in writing the Qurʾān. However, he still accepts that the historical kernel buried within the conflicting reports can be discovered. Thus, whether one accepts the traditional depiction(s) of the canonization of the Qurʾān, or Bell’s variation (or something like it: see, e.g., Burton 1977: 225–32), once again the conclusion seems to be that Muḥammad had an intimate role in producing the text of the Qurʾān.

Muḥammad on the Qurʾān

If the early sources can be trusted, even in part, then we should have a wealth of information that can shed even more light on the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qurʾān. The most likely source of that information should be the *sunna* of the prophet, or the example or conduct of Muḥammad. A frequent command in the Qurʾān is “Obey God and his messenger.” To obey God is to obey His words as preserved in the Qurʾān. To obey the messenger, at least since his death, is to obey Muḥammad’s example and words as preserved in the *sunna*. The *sunna*, at least since the end of the formative period of Islam, is preserved in the form of *ḥadīths* or short reports or anecdotes of what Muḥammad said or did. Each “authentic” *ḥadīth* normally has two parts, a *matn* (the actual report) preceded by an *isnād* (a chain of transmitters linking the person who ultimately recorded the report to Muḥammad). It is this *isnād* that guarantees its

authenticity. As we shall see below, it is one's trust in the *isnād*-system that determines one's approach not only to the development of the *sunna* and *ḥadīth* (Berg 2000: 6–64), but also to all of the early sources on Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. And that approach is absolutely critical to one's understanding of the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qur'ān.

As it turns out, the *sunna* is not a very useful source for information on this relationship. When one considers the function of the *sunna*, the reason for this becomes apparent. The two most important sources for Islamic law, the *sharī'a*, are the Qur'ān and the *sunna*. The Qur'ān contains relatively little strictly legal material. Thus, in terms of quantity, the *sunna* is the main source of Islamic law. It is also a source of law that is largely independent of the Qur'ān.

There are two types of *sunna* that are important exceptions to this principle. One is *tafsīr* (or Qur'ānic exegesis) by Muḥammad, and another is *asbāb al-nuzūl*, which purport to provide the circumstances under which certain passages were revealed to Muḥammad. Although not part of the *sunna*, the *sīra* or biography of Muḥammad also often comes in the form of *ḥadīths*. It is the *sīra* from which the description of the first revelation and Bell's framework are drawn. Surprisingly, therefore, neither *tafsīr*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, nor *sīra* yields much useful information either.

The *Tafsīr* of Muḥammad

The most authoritative *tafsīr*, or commentary of the Qur'ān, is that of Muḥammad. For instance, it is reported about the most prolific early exegete 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās (d. ca. 68/687):

When asked about something concerning the Qur'ān, if it was in the Qur'ān, he reported it. If it was not in the Qur'ān, but there was [something relevant] from the messenger of God, he reported it. And if there was nothing in the Qur'ān or from the messenger of God [concerning it], but there was from Abū Bakr and 'Umar, he reported it. And if there was nothing from them, he offered [*ijtahada*] his opinion. (Ibn Sa'd 1975: II, 266)

Therefore, it seems that this material would be the most obvious place to start looking for Muḥammad's understanding of, and relationship to, the Qur'ān.

However, as is clear from even a cursory examination of collections of exegesis, such as al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, or al-Bukhārī's (d. 256/870) section on *tafsīr* in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muḥammad is not particularly important to the Qur'ān's exegesis. There are just under 500 *ḥadīths* listed in the latter. Many of these 500 cite an authority other than Muḥammad, such as Ibn 'Abbās, and many others are simply *asbāb al-nuzūl* (see below) which provide a context but do not contain any explanation of the verse by Muḥammad (see, e.g., al-Bukhārī 1987: VI, 431, with *ḥadīths* on Q 15:90–1). With over 6,000 verses in the Qur'ān, clearly the *tafsīr* of Muḥammad is a meager resource – despite the purported practice of Ibn 'Abbās. This fact is also confirmed in al-Ṭabarī's collection of exegetical *ḥadīths*. Of his 38,397 *ḥadīths*, less than 10 percent cite Muḥammad, and

those that do rarely contain an explanation by Muḥammad. Rather, these *ḥadīths* are often *asbāb al-nuzūl* or even material drawn from the *sīra*.

As a result, if we wish to understand Muḥammad and his understanding of the Qurʾān's passages, then we must turn to other sources, to those which specifically claim to explain the circumstances of Muḥammad when a certain passage was revealed or to the biography of Muḥammad.

Asbāb al-nuzūl

Asbāb al-nuzūl, or causes or occasions of revelation, are a type of *ḥadīth* which purport to provide the situation that provoked a particular passage of the Qurʾān to be revealed. Since Muḥammad must have been involved in most of these situations or at the very least aware of them, in theory the *asbāb al-nuzūl* should provide insights into how revelations came to Muḥammad. Often according to the evidence of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, revelations came in response to questions addressed to Muḥammad. Whether events surrounding Muḥammad or specific questions addressed to Muḥammad, *asbāb al-nuzūl* presuppose a close relationship between the events of Muḥammad's life and the revelation of the Qurʾān.

In theory, especially as suggested by al-Suyūṭī, *asbāb al-nuzūl* can clarify legal issues: for example, whether a ruling is general or specific (to a person or event) or possibly the abrogation of one Qurʾānic verse by another (al-Suyūṭī 1951: I, 61–72; Rippin 1985a). John Wansbrough suggests that the purpose of *asbāb al-nuzūl* is, therefore, primarily to provide “a chronology of revelation” (Wansbrough 1977: 141–2 and 177–85). In other words, their function is to provide a chronological framework for apparently related Qurʾānic passages (though not a systematic one incorporating the whole of the Qurʾān).

There are, however, several problems with this. First, it is possible for several passages from different *sūras* of the Qurʾān to be revealed in response to the same event or question. How these passages subsequently became separated into *sūras* with different contexts and theoretically revealed at different times is problematic. Second, it is also common for several *asbāb al-nuzūl* to be adduced for a single Qurʾānic passage. Third, *asbāb al-nuzūl* suggest that many Qurʾānic passages were revealed as small units, even as isolated single verses. These isolated verses, however, now appear in the Qurʾān within larger contexts, the rest of which does not seem applicable to the situation. The example noted above of the revelation of Q 74:11–25 and 15:90 in response to al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra's plot to discredit Muḥammad demonstrates some of these problems. The material certainly seems contradictory, and at the very least makes discerning Muḥammad's role(s) in fashioning a particular passage of the Qurʾān extremely difficult.

A more plausible explanation for the complexity of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* material comes from Andrew Rippin, who investigated the literary techniques used within *asbāb al-nuzūl* in hopes of discerning their function. He asserts:

[T]he essential role of the material is found in haggadic exegesis; that is, the *sabab* functions to provide an interpretation of the verse within a basic narrative framework. I would

tentatively trace the origins of this material to the context of the *quṣṣās*, the wandering story-tellers, and pious preachers and to a basically popular religious worship situation where such stories would prove both enjoyable and edifying. (Rippin 1988: 19)

Although Rippin focuses primarily on the exegetical techniques employed in the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (such as lexical clarification, usually with glosses, Masoretic clarification including variant readings, narrative expansion including *ta' yīn al-mubham* or identifying the unknown, and contextual definition to ameliorate what has been called the Qur'ān's "referential style"), his conclusions also neatly explain the vastness and unsystematic nature of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*. As such, these *asbāb al-nuzūl* tell us very little about Muḥammad or even the Qur'ān in Muḥammad's time. Rather, they merely indicate how later Muslims, particularly the *qurrā'*, understood or worked with Qur'ānic verses.

The *Sīra* of Muḥammad

Although not considered *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the biography of Muḥammad, the *sīra*, seems to fulfill many of the same functions and often comes in the same form. In other words, it comes in the form of *ḥadīths* – reports preceded with *isnāds*. But more importantly, the *sīra*, like the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, provides information about when particular passages were revealed. Again there is inconsistency.

The *sīra* of Muḥammad contains surprisingly little material from which to discover Muḥammad's revelatory experiences or interpretation of the Qur'ān. The most significant passages which do are the descriptions of the first revelation on Mt. Ḥirā'. As noted above, there is some inconsistency about that event. However, the problems with the descriptions are far greater than those noted by Watt.

Gregor Schoeler represents scholars who maintain that historical materials can be discerned within the *sīra* and the *sunna*. Schoeler has argued that the second generation of Muslims were the first Muslims to concern themselves with gathering reports about the prophet, which they did, naturally, from the first generation of Muslims. 'Urwa b. Zubayr (d. ca. 93/711) best exemplifies this activity, and though he recited his material from memory, he possessed at least some written materials. In the second half of the first *hijrī* century, there was still a timidity about recording in writing any religious material other than the Qur'ān. The most important student in 'Urwa b. Zubayr's Medinan historical school was al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742). Schoeler suggests that al-Zuhrī used notes as mnemonic aids and notebooks for his students to copy. Only in the next generation of scholars, such as Ibn Ishāq, were biographical reports about Muḥammad regularly committed to writing. Ibn Ishāq, of course, collected accounts of Muḥammad's life and produced a structured narrative, a *sīra*. His book is lost, but his students further redacted it and preserved it in several forms. By comparing the various extant forms, Schoeler believes he can reconstruct earlier versions of the reports. Schoeler's method involves the comparison of traditions that share an early transmitter and searching for similarities in wording, meanings, and ordering of motifs in hopes of discerning the

transmitter's recension. Having applied this technique, Schoeler suggests that at least the main features of some reports of about Muḥammad's time in Medina are accurate and correctly transmitted (Schoeler 1996: 166). In so doing, Schoeler has simply developed a far more sophisticated and rigorous methodology to do what Bell and Watt had attempted to do.

It is in his attempt to support his argument, however, that Schoeler deals with an issue critical to the understanding of Muḥammad's relationship to the Qur'ān. Schoeler examines the reports about Muḥammad's first revelation to trace their transmission from the (probable) first reporter to their final redaction in extant works. By comparing the relevant traditions in various extant collections by Ibn Hishām, al-Ṭabarī, 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845), al-Bukhārī, Muslim (d. 261/875), and al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) whose *isnāds* list al-Zuhrī as transmitter, Schoeler attempts to discover the original archetype of the report circulated by al-Zuhrī. Similar comparisons are attempted for his informant, 'Urwa, and the latter's informant, 'Ā'isha. Schoeler suggests that an al-Zuhrī archetype can be postulated for some, but not all *ḥadīths*. 'Urwa is the likely source of the report, but his son Hishām transmitted a complete version while his student al-Zuhrī redacted it. However, though it is not impossible that 'ā'isha would have spoken to her nephew about such matters, her absence from some *isnāds* implies that these traditions reached 'Urwa from another source, and later transmitters repaired the *isnād* (that is, extended it back to someone who actually knew Muḥammad). Schoeler also examines another subset of traditions, those which are transmitted by Ibn Ishāq from Wahb b. Kaysān from 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr. Despite some significant variations, Schoeler again sees a uniform text as the source for the three extant versions, and so the original by Ibn Ishāq can be reconstructed. A comparison of the Ibn Ishāq traditions with those of al-Zuhrī reveals that certain motifs have different details and some motifs are unique to al-Zuhrī, whereas Ibn Ishāq's are distinguished by the presence of more detail and narrative accessories. But since the two sets of traditions strongly resemble each other in their main motifs and sequence, Schoeler argues that both originally had the same source. The motifs were likely combined in the first *hijrī* century and emerged within the Zubayrid family. 'Urwa cleansed the report of its story-teller (*qāṣṣ*) elements, reworking it into *ḥadīth*-format. Based on the biographical information and the *isnāds*, the original report is that of the *qāṣṣ*, 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr, who built the story out of various components while with the Zubayrid court. Significant changes were still introduced afterward: it was paraphrased, shortened, adorned, and rearranged. These changes decreased as time progressed, but came to an end with the redactions of Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī (Schoeler 1996: 59–117).

More skeptical scholars might question the validity of Schoeler's attempt to reconstruct hypothetical early sources from later extant texts – a project predicated on the assumption that the *isnād* contains historically reliable information. Nevertheless, Schoeler's own example shows that for even the most critical report about Muḥammad and the Qur'ān, that is, the first revelation of the Qur'ān, we cannot be certain that any part of it is accurate – despite its production during (or close to) the lifetime of people who had lived with Muḥammad.

The Qurʾān's Role in Shaping the Biography of MuḤammad

What the depictions of MuḤammad and the Qurʾān by Bell, Watt, and others share is that they ultimately see a close and intimate relationship between MuḤammad and the revelation. The Qurʾān can only be understood in light of the biography of MuḤammad. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century many Western scholars have doubted the authenticity of the biographical traditions about MuḤammad's life found in the *sīra*. At least some of the *sīra* may be a product of speculation on apparently biographical references in the Qurʾān. The most skeptical (and thus far still considered the most radical) understanding of the relationship between MuḤammad and the Qurʾān is that of John Wansbrough.

After examining the structure of the Qurʾān, Wansbrough suggested that the Qurʾān is not a product of "deliberate edition." That is, the various Muslim and secular accounts of the canonization process are incorrect. He argues:

Particularly in the *exempla* of salvation history, characterized by variant traditions, but also in passages of exclusively paraenetic or eschatological content, ellipses and repetition are such as to suggest not the carefully executed project of one or many men, but rather the product of an organic development from originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission. (Wansbrough 1977: 47)

Wansbrough terms these independent pericopes "prophetic *logia*" which came to be seen as direct utterances of God (via Gabriel and MuḤammad) but outside the canon of the Qurʾān are reports about direct utterances from God. He proposes that these *logia* originated as separate collections with communities "essentially sectarian but within the mainstream of oriental monotheism," that is, within a Judeo-Christian sectarian milieu (Wansbrough 1977: 50). In other words, not only is the traditional depiction of the collection of the Qurʾān in the first two decades after MuḤammad's death incorrect, but also the origin of those materials with a figure called MuḤammad seems improbable.

If Wansbrough's hypothesis is correct, it would seem to sever the connection between MuḤammad and the Qurʾān. The "Arabian prophet" (to use Wansbrough's term) had no connection to the contents of the Qurʾān, for they originated in another milieu. However, that does not mean the connection is severed; rather, he has reversed the connection. As evidenced by the use of *asbāb al-nuzūl* and the *sīra*, the traditional Muslim understanding has the Qurʾān as rooted in the life and situation of their prophet. Western scholars such as Bell see the Qurʾān as so connected to MuḤammad that it is the only reliable source for the biographical details about his life. Wansbrough, on the other hand, argues that the biography of MuḤammad (the "Muhammadan *evangelium*" as he calls it) represents a historicization of the *logia*. That is, essentially anonymous material of the Qurʾān is linked to the independent Arabian prophet.

Lest one be tempted to think that Wansbrough presents merely a revised form of Bell's claim that the Qurʾān is a historical source, Wansbrough states: "The historical value of the Muslim scripture lies, it seems to me, not in its role as a source for the

biography of Muhammad, but rather as source for the concepts eventually applied to composition of the Muslim theology of prophethood” (Wansbrough 1977: 56).

The relationship between the *evangelium* and the *logia* is ambivalent. At times the former serves as a narrative exegesis of the *logia*, but at other times the exegesis seems independent of the latter with Qur’ānic verses arbitrarily assigned to narrative accounts. In general, the narrative exegesis uses connected or isolated Qur’ānic passages as an outline for the narrative, or simply employs the diction and imagery of passages from the Qur’ān, or the passages are simply paraphrased (Wansbrough 1978: 1–49). In this way the Qur’ān was a source of concepts, but not historical facts. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Qur’ān does *seem* to confirm the biographical details of Muḥammad’s life. And the Qur’ān and Muḥammad (at least his biography – the *sunna* is another matter) are intimately connected.

Thus, the apparently overwhelming evidence of the close connections between Muḥammad and the Qur’ān is not what it appears to be. For instance, the accusations of soothsaying, sorcery, poetry, and possession leveled at Muḥammad reveal the arbitrariness of the dating system. Q 74 is one of the earliest Meccan *sūras*, Q 15 one of the latest. The story in the *sīra* simply connects keywords from the Qur’ān and historicizes them in a narrative account. Note also that these keywords were incorporated into the story of the first revelation – not as an accusation but as part of Muḥammad’s own doubts. (And so the Qur’ān’s verses were read by the inventor of that account as reassurance to Muḥammad that he was not a poet or possessed.) As these two examples seem to show, “[t]hematic and exemplary treatment of prophethood in the Qur’ān was reformulated in the *evangelium* (*sunna/sīra*) as the personal history of Muḥammad” (Wansbrough 1977: 65). The fact that messengers of God are often accused of such supernatural influences demonstrates that Ibn Ishāq’s key concern was not historicity but faithfulness to the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of prophethood.

What of the ubiquitous references to Muḥammad and the messenger of God in the Qur’ān? Wansbrough suggests: “That Q 33:40 contains one of four occurrences in scripture of the name Muḥammad suggests a particular polemic, in which not only the credentials but also the identity of the Arabian prophet was in dispute” (Wansbrough 1977: 64).

David Powers suggests yet another relationship between the Qur’ān and the *sīra*. By examining *sīra* material pertaining to Zayd b. Ḥāritha, Powers argues that Zayd’s capture, his manumission and adoption by Muḥammad, his marriage to and divorce of Zaynab, and his martyrdom at the Battle of Mu’ta appear to be salvation history – the elements of which were drawn from Christian and Jewish biblical and post-biblical motifs. These stories in turn prompted theologically and politically motivated additions and revisions to the Qur’ān, particularly passages that seem to refer to Zayd and Zaynab (Q 4:12, 4:23, 4:176, 33:6, and 33:36–40). The Qur’ān therefore remained open and fluid for three-quarters of a century between the death of the Muḥammad and the Umayyad caliph of ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 86/705) (Powers 2009). Powers’ arguments for the additions and revisions of the Qur’an seem to lend strong support to the Marwānid hypothesis, first put forward by Paul Casanova (1911: 103–42) and developed further by Alfred-Louis de Prémare (2002: 278–306 and 2010: 189–221). It accepts that most

of the materials of the Qurʾān are much older, but the production and official promulgation of a *ne varietur* text was much later. Thus it questions how the rudimentary polity of the early caliphate could have had the authority to canonize a text, transforming individual lines scribbled on camel shoulder blades and rocks into a complete, single, fixed, and authoritative text on papyrus or vellum in one generation, whereas ʿAbd al-Malik had the motivation and means to impose such standardization (Robinson 2005: 102; see also Cook 2000: 122–3). Powers’ revisionism is not as radical as that of Wansbrough in that it does not fully sever Muḥammad from the Qurʾān and the Qurʾān from Muḥammad, but still undermines their causal connection by making the contents both more fluid and subject to outside forces.

Conclusions

The descriptions of the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qurʾān put forth by Muslim and sanguine secular scholars are clearly at odds with those put forth by skeptical scholars. The issue centers on how much the sources for the formative period of Islam, primarily the Qurʾān, *sīra*, and *sunna*, can be relied upon for historical information, that is to say, “what really happened.” While clearly there is as much disagreement among secular scholars as there is between the traditional Muslim accounts and these scholars, one thing is clear. Even scholars such as Schoeler, who tried to demonstrate that the *sīra* contains a discernible authentic kernel, finds that some of the most key passages about the revelation of the Qurʾān to Muḥammad are problematic.

So, while at first glance there may seem to be a wealth of material from which to reconstruct Muḥammad’s relationship with the Qurʾān, none of that material is as certain as it appears. Much depends on one’s faith in the *isnād*. If one believes that *isnāds* contain (some) historical information, then *sunna* (especially, prophetic *tafsīr* and *asbāb al-nuzūl ḥadīths*) and the *sīra* can yield much, as the work of Bell and Watt, for example, tries to demonstrate. However, to the more skeptical scholars, these more sanguine scholars are hardly more historiographically sophisticated than the theologically motivated Muslim scholars. Both assume that the literary sources reflect actual events, or “what really happened.” The Muslim position generally assumes that the sources are an unself-conscious and transparent reflection of the events, whereas the secular position sees them as tendentially shaped and translucent. The similarity of the conclusions drawn by both should not be thought of as an emerging consensus about what really happened, but rather an emerging convergence based upon similar approaches to the sources (which *claim* to state what really happened).

If one does not trust the sources, the *isnāds*, the entire edifice begins to collapse. What we are left with is not so much a wealth of material describing (or at least providing evidence from which we can reconstruct) Muḥammad’s relationship with the Qurʾān. Instead, we have a wealth of material from which we can reconstruct what Muslims (particularly those Muslims who a century or so later preserved the material) believed Muḥammad’s relationship with the Qurʾān to have been. This, of course, is historically valuable too. However, for many it is frustrating, for it does not allow us to fall into that

comfortable genetic fallacy that scholars share with fundamentalists: that the origins provide “essence” or “purity” and so matter far more than the development.

What all three groups of scholars (i.e., the Muslim theological, the secular but sanguine, and the secular but skeptical) share is a kind of tautology. The sources do not evince evidence of God’s revelation of the Qur’ān to Muḥammad until one has assumed it; the sources do not evince evidence of Muḥammad’s role in the production of the Qur’ān until one has assumed it; the sources do not evince the Qur’ān’s role in the construction of the figure of Muḥammad until one has assumed it; and the sources do not evince the impact of later theological and political issues of both the contents of the Qur’ān and the biography of Muḥammad until one assumes it. Obviously, these positions are mutually exclusive and so it would be extremely useful to be able to discern which one is correct. The question is, “how?” The difficulty remains with the nature of our sources. The Qur’ān, the *sīra*, the *sunna* are documents:

Documents grow in worlds and are part of those worlds; they do not materialize out of the ether. The significance and function of the document – at least as conceived by those initially responsible for it – is as a piece of a functional contribution to the world of which it is a part. And that world, while partially constituted by the document itself, cannot simply be extracted from...[it] by inference. (Arnal 2001: 97)

What is missing, then, is the concrete political, societal, and economic context(s) in which these documents developed. This kind of information must come from sources other than the Qur’ān, the *sīra*, the *sunna* – archaeology, for instance. Thus, the advantage of the skeptical, secular approaches to Islamic origins and to the more specific question of the relationship of the figure of Muḥammad (as presented in various documents) to the (document of) the Qur’ān is not that they are more convincing or produce more “facts.” Compared with the other two approaches, not only do they produce less “facts,” but they even seem to destroy “facts.” Rather, the unique advantage of the skeptical approaches is that they recognize documents for what they are and so employ methods of analysis appropriate for documents, cautioning us about reading literature as history or treating texts as archaeological sites (Wansbrough 1987).

Notes

- 1 The use of the term “secular” is not meant to suggest that these scholars are devoid of theological agendas. Rather, a “secular” scholar is one whose research is not guided by Muslim theological motivations. The term, therefore, can include Western, non-Western, Muslim, and/or non-Muslim scholars.
- 2 Furthermore, the Qur’ān mentions Gabriel in only two passages, Q 2:97–8 and 66:4, with only the former mentioning his role as messenger. As Stefan Wild (1996: 147) points out, in the *sīra* even Gabriel acting as the mediator between God and Muḥammad is not consistent, and more direct speech may be implied with the expression *qāla Allāhu li-Muḥammad*, “God said to Muḥammad.” For problems with Q 42:51 and the concept of serial revelation see Wansbrough (1977: 34 and 38, respectively). Another gray area is the *ḥadīth al-qudsī*. These

ḥadīths in the *sunna* purport to be revelations to Muḥammad, but are not in the Qurʾān. They are understood not to be God's words, but Muḥammad's wording of inspiration from God, and not necessarily mediated by Gabriel.

- 3 This assumption on the part of Bell has some support in both the Qurʾān and in the *sunna*. The Qurʾān indicates in Q 6:7 that the idea of producing a book on papyrus did at least enter Muḥammad's mind. In addition, *ṣuḥuf* (that is, separate, unbound sheets used for writing) are connected with revelation in Q 20:133; 53:37; 80:13; 87:18, and 98:2. Finally, when the Qurʾān replies to the accusation of being written down in Q 25:6–7, it does not deny the charge. There is also evidence that Muḥammad kept some sort of written record and that some editing took place. ʿAbd Allāh b. Saʿd b. Abī Sarh is said to have been writing down a Meccan revelation (Q 23:12 ff.) at Medina at Muḥammad's dictation. When he reached the end, Muḥammad paused, the scribe interjected, "Blessed be God, the best of creators." Apparently when Muḥammad adopted this interjection as the needed rhyme-phrase, the scribe became suspicious and later gave up Islam and returned to Mecca. For further details on these arguments see Watt and Bell (1970: 16–19).
- 4 However, Bell certainly felt that Muḥammad was sincere in his belief that the revelations to him were of a divine nature, and that Muḥammad had no sinister motivations, nor any mental or medical deficiencies. Also, Bell assumed that the Qurʾān essentially contained all of Muḥammad's revelations and that the later compilers were quite assiduous in their collecting (or copying) of the Qurʾān. This assumption is borne out by the varying and even contradictory passages preserved in the Qurʾān.

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CHAPTER 13

Context: ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb

Avraham Hakim

The basic foundations of Islamic law are the Qur’ān, the holy book that formulates the written law, and the *sunna*, the oral law. Both are believed to originate from the prophet Muḥammad, the Qur’ān having been revealed to him by the angel Gabriel and the *sunna* having been formulated on his authority.

Our knowledge on these issues derives mainly from the Islamic traditions. For our purposes, these traditions are considered not as accounts of historical events but as texts that reflect the ideas, beliefs, and predilections of the scholars who produced and circulated them in the first era of Islam, roughly towards the turn of the first *hijrī* century, the seventh/eighth century CE. These texts were provided with chains of transmitters that projected them backwards to the times of the founding fathers of Islam, Muḥammad and his companions, considered to be the highest authorities on all Islamic issues.

As regards the *sunna*, traditions sometimes attribute a law not only to Muḥammad but also to one of his companions, resulting thus in a possible conflict of authority, since the companion’s law may contradict that of the prophet (Hakim 2003). As for the revelation of the Qur’ān, it is believed that it is the privilege of Muḥammad, and his alone. Only he, in his capacity as the prophet, can be addressed by God’s messenger, Gabriel, and given the book.

However, a number of traditions pertaining to the excellence of the second “rightly guided” caliph, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (ruled 13–23/634–44), describe him as an active partner in the revelation of the Qur’ān. The circulation of such traditions may indicate that in early Islam there was an attempt to involve the head of the Islamic community in the revelation of the book, probably in order to magnify his image as a leader.

Consequently, the image of the caliph came to be opposed to that of the prophet. This chapter is devoted to the description of several of these traditions, in which the images of the prophet and the caliph join in the issue of Qur'ānic revelation.

Aiming at God's Mind

In several traditions 'Umar's involvement in Qur'ānic revelation is illustrated by his ability to formulate a rule or take a position on a certain issue according to the Qur'ān before the revelation on this same issue occurs. In other words, 'Umar was granted the sublime ability to read God's mind. In this context, the prophet is supposed to have said that when people spoke their mind on a matter and 'Umar spoke his on that same matter, the Qur'ān was revealed according to 'Umar's mind (Ibn Ḥanbal 1983: I, 339–40, no. 488). Similarly, the famous early Qur'ānic commentator Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. ca. 104/723) is said to have stated that “when 'Umar speaks his mind on a certain issue, the Qur'ān is revealed accordingly” (Ibn Abī Shayba 1995: VI, 357, no. 31971). Another tradition attributes to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib the following impressive statement: “Indeed the Qur'ān includes many of 'Umar's views” (Abū Nu'aym 1994: 296–7, no. 98). All these statements imply that several Qur'ānic rulings, some of which will be described below, were fashioned on the basis of 'Umar's views, ideas, or utterances.

The above statement by 'Alī in praise of 'Umar is by no means incidental and it is in need of some clarification. These two great companions of the prophet were fierce opponents: traditions report that 'Alī was denied the caliphate after the death of the prophet at 'Umar's instigation, and that the latter did his utmost in electing Abū Bakr to the highest office. The enmity that ensued between the two is well known (Madelung 1997: 28–56). By having 'Alī utter such a statement praising his bitter opponent, Sunnī tradition gives greater credibility to 'Umar's role in Qur'ānic revelation, as if claiming: “If your enemy praises you so much, then it must be true.”

Mutual Agreement

The concept of a mutual understanding or agreement between 'Umar and Qur'ānic revelation is best expressed in a widely circulated utterance attributed to 'Umar himself: “I agreed (*wāfaqtu*) with God on three matters” (Ibn Ḥanbal n.d.: I, 23; Abū Dāwūd n.d.: 9). The verb *wāfaqa*, “to agree with,” can also be rendered as “to accord with,” “to consent with,” or “to be of one mind or opinion with someone” (Lane 1863: s.v. *w-f-q*). In other words, 'Umar is stating that he was of one mind with God on these matters.

In a rare opposite version, 'Umar is supposed to have said: “God agreed with me (*wāfaqanī*) on three matters” (Ibn Ḥanbal 1983: I, 343, no. 495). Read for its fullest implications, one might suggest that this bold statement infers that it is God who reads 'Umar's mind and not the other way around. One may assume that this latter version belongs to an earlier layer of traditions than the one described above. The previous version, it can be postulated, was circulated in order to mitigate the theological difficulty

inherent in this latter version, which poses the difficulty of subordinating God's revelation to human will. Nevertheless, both versions were quoted in the most revered canonical collection of Islamic traditions, that of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870). This means that, from the Muslim point of view, these versions were taken to be trustworthy and authentic (Ibn Ḥajar 1996: IX, 20, no. 4483). Yet, the theological difficulty did not go unnoticed by Muslim scholars who strove to provide it with an explanation befitting the Muslim creed (Ibn Ḥajar 1996: II, 64).

The Jewish Sources: Moses

The concept that there can be an interaction between a human being and God's revelation is expressed already in the *Babylonian Talmud*, where two different and conflicting statements describe Moses in this context. On the one hand, it is stated: "Three things did Moses upon his own authority, and his view agreed with that of God" (Yebamot 62b). On the other hand it is stated: "Three things did Moses upon his own authority, and God agreed thereto" (Shabbat 87a). The only difference between these two versions is that the subject of the verb "to agree" varies. In the first version, it is Moses who agrees in advance with God, while in the second, it is God who agrees, *a posteriori*, with Moses.

There is a distinct similarity between the two conflicting statements about Moses in the Talmud and the two conflicting statements uttered by ʿUmar as discussed above. In both sets of statements we are told about three matters that the two did on their own authority and God either agrees with them on these matters or each one of the two men agrees with God. In both sets of traditions the verb "to agree" can be rendered as to be of the same mind as someone. This similarity more than suggests that Islamic tradition fashioned a part of ʿUmar's image after that of Moses, and ascribed to the former virtues attributed in early Jewish sources to the latter. The matters that Moses did on his own were revealed as verses in the Torah later on, just as the matters ʿUmar did on his own were revealed as verses in the Qurʾān. Moreover, the same theological issue that confronted the Muslim scholars also puzzled the Jewish scholars: they, too, debated the issue of whether it is conceivable that God agrees *a posteriori* to the matters that Moses did on his own authority.

It is difficult to determine how and by what means these early Jewish concepts would have been introduced to the Islamic tradition. However, a thorough examination of traditions in praise of ʿUmar indicates that the model of Moses served in more than one instance for the fashioning of ʿUmar's image as an ideal leader. Thus, Muḥammad is supposed to have drawn a comparison between some of his companions and the biblical prophets, and to have compared ʿUmar to Moses (al-Daylamī 1986: VI, 40, no. 6124).

Beyond the general concept of the similarity between ʿUmar and Moses, the Islamic tradition provides a description of specific incidents where this similarity is demonstrated. These incidents occur in traditions of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* type, that is, traditions that describe the circumstances of the revelation of certain verses of the Qurʾān (Rubin 1995: 226–33). It is noteworthy that although the model of Moses relates to only three matters that he did on his own authority, the Islamic tradition describes far more than

three Qur'ānic verses which are supposed to have been revealed according to 'Umar's mind. This in itself indicates that the Islamic tradition developed with a dynamic of its own. These verses, about thirty, are known in the sources as *Muwāfaqāt 'Umar*, that is, the agreements of 'Umar (with God), and they were gathered by scholars in specific chapters bearing that title, in their books (al-Suyūfī 1988: 142–6) or in independent books and epistles (Ibn al-Naḳīb; al-Imādī 1996). In the following pages a few such typical verses will be described and textually analyzed.

Anticipating God's Revelation

One kind of mutual agreement between 'Umar and God occurs when the former anticipates the latter and duplicates His words. This is the case with the revelation of verses Q 23:12–14 in which God describes the creation of Adam.

In the early exegesis of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), it is reported that these verses were revealed to the prophet in the presence of 'Umar: "We created the man of an extraction of clay, then We set him, a drop, in a receptacle secure, then We created of the drop a clot, then We created of the clot a tissue, then We created of the tissue bones, then We garmented the bones in flesh, then We produced him as another creature." Upon hearing this detailed description of God's creation, 'Umar is supposed to have exclaimed: "So blessed be God, the fairest of creators!" And the prophet said: "This is the way it was revealed, O 'Umar!" (Muqātil 1989: III, 153; al-Suyūfī 1985: V, 7).

In this tradition, 'Umar marvels at the sublime event of the creation of man and at the details God provided in His description. His utterance on this occasion reflects his ability to read God's mind, and God repeats word by word 'Umar's exclamation, thus completing verse Q 23:14.

The Case of the *Hijāb* Verse

The name *hijāb* verse is given in Islamic tradition to Q 33:53 in which God addresses the Muslim believers and commands them regarding the wives of the prophet: "And when you ask his wives for any object, ask them from behind a curtain (*hijāb*)." This verse prohibits the wives of Muḥammad from appearing in the presence of male Muslim believers (except close family members).

According to Islamic traditions this verse was revealed after the intervention of 'Umar, who did not look favorably on the fact that the wives of the prophet used to appear in public unveiled. He uttered his opinion on the matter by saying to the prophet that men, good and bad, were accustomed to approaching his wives freely and that he, Muḥammad, should order them to take cover behind a veil. The prophet did not answer, but soon enough, God gave backing to 'Umar's opinion by revealing the verse of the *hijāb* (Ibn Shabba 1979: III, 860). In some tradition collections, the canonical ones included, this verse represents one of the three matters that 'Umar and God agreed upon (Ibn Ḥajar 1996: IX, 483, no. 4790).

Other traditions provide more details as to the circumstances and the identity of the wives of the prophet who caused 'Umar's intervention and, consequently, the revelation of the verse. Three different versions dealing with three different wives are quoted in the sources.

‘Ā’isha

A widely circulated version mentions an incident of physical contact between ‘Ā’isha and ‘Umar. She relates that while she was eating a big bowl of dates mixed with butter (*ḥays*) with her husband Muḥammad, ‘Umar passed by and Muḥammad invited him to share their meal. As ‘Umar was reaching for the bowl, his finger touched that of ‘Ā’isha. He shouted his objection, saying: “If only I could be obeyed in what concerns you [i.e., the prophet’s wives], you would remain unseen [literally: No eye would look at you].” He was obeyed indeed, and God revealed the *ḥijāb* verse according to his wish (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1997: X, 3148, no. 17756; Ibn Abī Shayba 1995: III, 361, no. 32008).

Sawda

However, other versions describe ‘Umar as confronting the prophet directly on this issue. The circumstances of the revelation of this verse are most embarrassing from the standpoint of later Muslim behavior, which might be the reason why the circulation of these versions is quite limited and why they were left outside the canonical collections of the Islamic tradition.

The following version relates to another wife of Muḥammad, Sawda, daughter of Zam‘a, who used to appear unveiled in public. Her behavior brought about ‘Umar’s intervention and consequently caused the revelation of the *ḥijāb* verse.

‘Ā’isha relates that the wives of the prophet used to go out by night to al-Manāṣī‘, a large open field near Medina, to relieve themselves. ‘Umar approached the prophet more than once requesting him to put the veil on his wives. [The tradition points out that ‘Umar used to address Muḥammad in the imperative form: “Cover your wives,” he used to say to him]. But the prophet did not pay heed to this request. One night Sawda, a distinctively tall woman, went out to relieve herself. ‘Umar, who had been watching, shouted at her: “O Sawda we recognize you.” ‘Umar did so, hoping a verse concerning the *ḥijāb* would be revealed, and indeed God revealed the veil verse. (Ibn Ḥanbal n.d.: VI, 223; Ibn Shabba 1979: III, 860)

In this version, ‘Umar meddles in the prophet’s private life. By addressing Muḥammad in the imperative (“Cover your wives”), ‘Umar seems to be patronizing the prophet of Islam, and thus shaming him. When ‘Umar realized that the prophet did not pay heed to his demands, he turned to a higher instance, to God, in the hope that He would prove him right by revealing a Qur’ānic verse. From the wording of the tradition, it seems that in order to compel God to intervene in the matter of the veil, ‘Umar goes to extreme measures, even shaming one of the prophet’s wives. God grants ‘Umar’s wish and

reveals the verse imposing the veil. Such a course of events gives the impression that 'Umar can summon God's intervention at will, and in this manner, his moral and religious presence as a leader is felt in its utmost intensity, as opposed to the prophet's apparent unwillingness to do "the right thing."

Zaynab

In the following version the prophet's wife who causes the verse of the veil to be revealed according to 'Umar's wish is Zaynab, daughter of Jaḥsh. It is related that 'Umar ordered the wives of the prophet to cover themselves with a veil. Zaynab resented this behavior and admonished 'Umar, saying: "O Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, you are jealous for us even though the revelation (of the Qur'ān) occurs in our homes." So God revealed verse Q 33:53 (Ibn Shabba 1979: III, 860; al-Ṭabarānī n.d.: IX, 184–5, no. 8828).

Here also, 'Umar is portrayed as offending the prophet: he addresses Muḥammad's wives behind his back and gives them orders regarding how to behave, which is unacceptable to any man in Arabian society, let alone the prophet. Zaynab reprimands him harshly for his rude behavior, alluding to the fact that he is not supposed to show jealousy regarding somebody else's wife, and that he is meddling in the private life of no less than the prophet, her husband, who lives in the house where God's revelation occurs. Yet, in spite of 'Umar's rude behavior and its implications for Muḥammad's honor both as a prophet and as a husband, God backs up 'Umar and reveals the verse. Once more, 'Umar is described as blessed with God's grace, and his image serves as the most sublime source of the religious and moral laws, even at the expense of the prophet.

The Shī'ī position

The Shī'ites never acknowledged 'Umar's virtues, mainly because of his predominant role in depriving 'Alī of the privilege of succeeding the prophet as leader of the Muslim community. They did not miss any opportunity to slander 'Umar, and the various stories about the revelation of the *ḥijāb* verse served them well. In particular, they focused on Sawda's story; they scorned 'Umar for exposing in public a wife of the prophet, thus shaming her and her husband and invading the privacy of the most revered leader of Islam (Ibn Ṭāwūs 1999: II, 154).

Muḥammad causes the revelation of the verse

Sunnī scholars soon became aware of the predominant role of 'Umar in these stories and its impact on the image of Muḥammad. For example, the commentator al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) claimed that the story in which 'Umar orders the wives of the prophet to put on the veil is totally unreliable and should be rejected (al-Qurṭubī 1965: XIV, 224).

For this reason, other versions were put into circulation, which conflicted with the versions described above. In them, 'Umar is totally absent from the scene and the initiator of

the revelation of Q 33:53 is the prophet himself. In one of these versions, the story of the prophet's meal with ʿĀ'isha is retold without mentioning ʿUmar's name. It is reported that the prophet was having lunch with ʿĀ'isha and several of his companions. The hand of one of them touched his wife's hand and Muḥammad disapproved strongly. Consequently, the *hijāb* verse was revealed in response to the prophet's wish (al-Ṭabarī 1987: XXII, 28).

By omitting the names of the companions present at the lunch, the tradition focuses on the prophet alone. His disapproval of any physical contact with his wife is the cause of the revelation of the verse. Thus, his image is rehabilitated vis-à-vis that of ʿUmar, and he becomes the ultimate source of authority and moral values.

The Case of the Prohibition Against Wine

A different moral aspect of ʿUmar's image as a leader blessed with God's grace is linked to the Qur'ānic prohibition against drinking wine. Here also ʿUmar is endowed with the ability to "dictate" the revelation of verses according to his wishes.

The prohibition against drinking wine is one of the fundamental beliefs that separate Islam from the two other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity. It should be remembered that in the latter religions, wine is not only allowed, it is indeed a symbol of faith; in Judaism it serves as the drink of the *Kiddush*, the traditional benediction sanctifying the Sabbath and the festivals, while in Christianity wine serves also as a means of communion of the believer with Jesus Christ. Linking ʿUmar to the prohibition against wine is one of the greatest virtues attributed to him by the Islamic tradition. It is noteworthy that the ban on drinking wine in the Qur'ān is not decisive, and its finality varies from verse to verse. The revelation of the verses that seem to prohibit the drinking of wine in the clearest sense is attributed to ʿUmar.

Several versions are quoted in the sources. The one recounted below is probably from a very early layer of traditions, which explains its rarity.

ʿUmar addressed God saying: "O God, give us a clear commandment regarding the wine." So verse Q 4:43 was revealed: "O believers, draw not near to prayer when you are drunken until you know what you are saying." The prophet [to whom the verse was revealed] summoned ʿUmar and recited it to him. It seems that this verse did not conform to what ʿUmar had in mind. So he addressed God again: "O God, give us a clear commandment regarding the wine." And verse Q 2:219 was revealed: "They will question thee concerning wine and arrow-shuffling. Say: 'In both is heinous sin, and uses for men, but the sin in them is more heinous than the usefulness.'" The prophet summoned ʿUmar and recited it to him. It seems that this verse (too) did not conform to what ʿUmar had in mind. So he addressed God again: "O God, give us a clear commandment regarding the wine." And verses Q 5:90–1 were revealed: "O believers, wine and arrow-shuffling, idols and divining-arrows are an abomination, some of Satan's work; so avoid it; haply so you will prosper. Satan only desires to precipitate enmity and hatred between you in regard to wine and arrow-shuffling, and to bar you from the remembrance of God, and from prayer. Will you then desist?" The prophet summoned ʿUmar and recited it to him. Upon hearing the verse ʿUmar exclaimed: "O God, indeed we desist." (al-Ḥākīm al-Nīsābūrī 1990: IV, 159–60)

The wording of this tradition calls for comment. One should note that it is 'Umar and not Muḥammad who addresses God regarding the revelation of a clear commandment regarding wine. This means that it is 'Umar himself who initiated the prohibition of wine in the first place. As he addresses God again and again the verses revealed become clearer and more decisive. Were it not for 'Umar's initiative the Qur'ānic prohibition would have remained indecisive as it was when the first verse was revealed. As the story develops, the reader senses the passivity of the prophet as opposed to the activity of 'Umar concerning this issue. The main role of the prophet is to serve as the recipient of the revelation while it is 'Umar who holds a direct dialogue with God. The role of 'Umar in this story is astonishing and hardly conceivable in Muslim terms: he is portrayed as the one who regulates the revelation of the verses according to his own understanding. It is as if he is summoning God Almighty to reveal the "right" verse that prohibits wine according to his own views and understanding. In the words of the tradition: "It seems that the verse did not conform to what 'Umar had in mind." And since he feels that the verse revealed is not clear enough, he demands another and another until he is satisfied, until the verse revealed prohibits wine in the way he understands it. Only then does he yield.

This tradition portrays 'Umar's image as the true formulator of the Islamic law for the nascent Muslim community, while the prophet's image in this respect is dimmed. Ultimately, the Muslim community rallied around its prophet and not around a caliph, not even 'Umar. This is reflected in other traditions, probably from a later layer than the one above, where Muḥammad plays the major role in the prohibition of wine. Such is the case of a tradition circulated on the authority of 'Umar's son, 'Abd Allāh, according to which the revelation of the different verses that prohibit wine drinking is at the exclusive initiative of the prophet, after Muslim believers differed on the status of wine. In this tradition, 'Umar is not mentioned (Abū Dāwūd n.d.: 264, no. 1957). In other versions where 'Umar is mentioned, he is portrayed as playing a minor role, (al-Ṭabarī 1969: IV, 332–4, no. 4145) or as accepting enthusiastically the prohibition of wine initiated by the prophet (al-Ṭabarī 1969: IV, 330, no. 4142).

The Ransom of the Prisoners of the Battle of Badr

Another aspect of the mutual agreement between 'Umar and God is expressed in some versions of the interpretation of Q 8:67–9. According to many scholars, these verses were revealed after Muḥammad's victory over the unbelievers from Quraysh at Badr in the year 2/624 and the ransom the Muslims demanded in order to release the prisoners they had captured during the battle. The Qur'ān states:

Q 8:67 It is not for any prophet to have prisoners until he make wide slaughter in the land. You desire the chance goods of the present world, and God desires the world to come; and God is All-mighty, All-wise.

Q 8:68 Had it not been for a prior prescription from God, there had afflicted you, for what you took, a mighty chastisement.

Q 8:69 Eat of what you had taken as booty, such as is lawful and good; and fear you God; surely God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.

Some scholars read verse 67 above as a command to kill the defeated unbelievers on the battleground, before they are taken prisoner; these scholars found a direct link between this verse and the eagerness of the Muslims to enjoy the spoils of the great victory of Badr and the ransom for the prisoners of war they captured. As verses 68–9 describe, the Muslims should have been chastised for their misconduct, their craving for the pleasures of this world and because they neglected the principles of a war of extermination against the unbelievers. However, because of His preordination to show them mercy and to allow them to enjoy the spoils of wars, God deferred His chastisement. Actually, several scholars agree that the Muslims were ultimately allowed to take ransom for prisoners of war who were unbelievers according to another verse revealed in the Qurʾān (Q 4:47), and thus the above verse was abrogated.

ʿUmar’s involvement in the revelation of these verses, as described below, reflects the divine grace bestowed on him. However, in this particular case, the laws that could have been formulated according to these verses and to ʿUmar’s view were not put into effect and are not part of the Islamic law because of their harsh implications.

Only ʿUmar objects to the ransom and demands to kill unbelievers

Several traditions report that before the revelation of the verses that command the killing of defeated unbelievers and prohibit ransoming them, the prophet and his companions had preferred to accept the ransom and not to kill the prisoners who were the blood relatives of several companions. Only ʿUmar held the opposite view, demanding that unbelievers be killed regardless of their status. In the ensuing controversy between ʿUmar and all the other Muslim believers, including the prophet, the above verses Q 8:67–9 were revealed, vindicating ʿUmar and stating that God agreed with his view to the detriment of everybody else. The story is quoted in Muqātil b. Sulaymān’s exegesis.

The prophet consulted with his companions regarding the prisoners taken at Badr. ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb advised: “Put them all to death, for they are the heads of unbelief and the leaders of the deviation from the right path.” Abū Bakr argued: “Don’t put them to death, for God helped us achieve our vengeance, killed the polytheists and defeated them. It is preferable to let them redeem themselves for the ransom they pay will strengthen Islam and help finance the war against them. Maybe God will turn them to supporters of Islam and they will convert.”

Abū Bakr’s argument pleased the prophet, for he was merciful, just like Abū Bakr, while ʿUmar was sharp and unflinching. The prophet agreed with Abū Bakr’s view and demanded a ransom from the prisoners. However, God revealed a verse agreeing with ʿUmar’s view, stating: “It is not for any prophet to have prisoners....” Then the prophet addressed ʿUmar and said to him: “Bless God, for your God agreed with you (*wātāka*).” ʿUmar said: “Bless God who agreed with me regarding the prisoners of Badr.” And the prophet added: “If a chastisement were to descend from heaven none of us would be saved except for ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb; indeed he forbade me and I did not pay heed.” (Muqātil 1989: II, 129)

In this story, it is Muḥammad himself who admits that he was wrong for not taking ʿUmar's advice, and he even states that only ʿUmar would have been saved had the Muslims been punished from heaven, as alluded to in the Qurʾānic verse. Moreover, the prophet understands God's agreement with ʿUmar, demonstrated by the revelation of the verse backing the latter's view, as God's compliance with ʿUmar. This is reflected in the use of the verb *wātā*, "to comply with." It is as if the prophet was saying to ʿUmar: "God obeyed you on that matter."

In a different version of this tradition, the prophet and ʿUmar are portrayed in direct confrontation over the issue of the ransom. While ʿUmar suggests putting the prisoners to death, the prophet rejects his advice on the grounds that the prisoners are blood brothers of the Muslims and prefers Abū Bakr's advice to ransom them. Then God revealed the verses justifying ʿUmar (Ibn Ḥanbal n.d.: III, 243).

In this last version the prophet and Abū Bakr are portrayed as abiding by the old principle of loyalty to the tribe, held dear in the pre-Islamic era, the *jāhiliyya*, while ʿUmar represents the true spirit of the new religion, Islam, and abides by one of its fundamental principles, the war against unbelievers. The verses revealed subsequently reflect God's accord with ʿUmar, while the prophet is described as someone who could have been punished by God for not putting the prisoners to death.

Only ʿUmar refuses a share of the booty

ʿUmar is portrayed not only as the sole companion of the prophet who opposes the ransoming of the prisoners but also as the only one who refuses to take a share of the booty. While the Muslim believers yearned for the booty in the aftermath of the battle, ʿUmar ignored it and went on slaying every prisoner he met. He said to the prophet: "What do we care about booty? We are people who set out to fight a holy war for God's religion until He is worshipped (everywhere)." The prophet commented: "O ʿUmar, if we were to be punished for what we did, you are the only one who would have been saved; God said: 'It is unlawful to take (booty and ransom) on your own will before I permit them to you. Do not do it again'" (al-Ṭabarī 1969: XIV, 71, no. 16319). ʿUmar is portrayed here as the only Muslim who cared for the war for the glory of God, *jihād*. Indeed, when addressing the prophet about fighting for God, he is made to use the word *nujāhid*, that is, "we fight a holy war."

Only ʿUmar would have been saved from God's punishment

Several versions focus on the idea that ʿUmar would have been the only survivor of the harsh punishment that would have been inflicted on the Muslims, were it not for God's predestination to forgive them. In one version, Muḥammad addresses ʿUmar, saying: "We were almost stricken by evil because we differed from you" (Abū Nuʿaym n.d.: I, 43). In a different version, the prophet states, "Because we differed from ʿUmar's opinion we were almost doomed, and if chastisement were to be sent down from heaven, none of us would have been spared except ʿUmar" (al-Suyūfī 1985: III, 203).

The prophet, in his own words, includes himself among those who could have been punished. Consequently, he admits 'Umar's superiority over all other Muslims. By abiding solely by the principles of holy war against unbelievers, 'Umar is the only one whose view accords with God's view as it is revealed in the Qur'ān.

The canonical version: The prophet excluded from punishment

However, the version that was accepted by the Muslims as authoritative and reliable is more balanced, and precludes the possibility for any Muslim to be superior to the prophet himself. The following version is quoted by Muslim (d. 261/875) in the chapter dealing with *jihād* in his famous canonical collection of traditions.

It is reported that, contrary to Abū Bakr, 'Umar suggested putting all the prisoners to death. Since the captured unbelievers were blood brothers of the Muslims, he devised a scheme according to which each Muslim would slay a relative of his (thus preventing Quraysh from seeking revenge or blood money from the Muslims). The prophet rejected this suggestion on the grounds that blood relatives should be spared (even though they are unbelievers). The next day, when 'Umar came to meet the prophet and Abū Bakr, he saw them crying. He sympathized with them, comforted them, and asked them what it was all about. The prophet said, "I am crying because your brethren suggested to me to take the ransom, and now I can see their punishment coming close, as close as this tree," and he pointed towards a tree nearby. Then God revealed the verses quoted above that deal with the duty to slay the unbelievers before they are taken prisoners, and the verses revealed after that which condone the taking of the booty (Muslim 1983: III, 1385, no. 1763).

This version does not mention the utterance according to which 'Umar was the only Muslim who would be saved if a punishment were to be sent down from heaven. Therefore, the prophet is not threatened with any chastisement. Moreover, this tradition emphasizes that ultimately God allowed Muslims to take the ransom, and thus the dignity of the prophet and his companions is preserved. Yet even in this balanced version, 'Umar is still the only companion who suggests to the prophet to abstain from taking ransom, and the subsequent revelation proves him right.

The Shī'ī position

The Shī'ī sources are very much aware of the impact of such traditions on the Muslim community, and they strive to diminish 'Umar's image. Shī'ī scholars reject the above-described traditions and totally ignore 'Umar's role in the prisoners of Badr affair (Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kūfī n.d.: 184). For example, the ninth Shī'ite Imām, Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Jawād (d. 220/835), was asked in the presence of the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/834) about several traditions in praise of 'Umar, including the one that exempted him from the punishment that could have been inflicted on the Muslims for

taking the ransom at Badr. Al-Jawād refuted the tradition, basing himself on Q 8:33, according to which God will never punish the Muslims as long as Muḥammad lives among them, and therefore the story about 'Umar is nothing but a fiction since no Muslim was supposed to be punished in the first place (al-Ṭabrisī 1989: 449).

'Umar and the Hypocrites

'Umar's involvement in the revelation of the Qur'ān reflects not only his harsh attitude towards unbelievers outside the Muslim community, but also his attitude towards the hypocrites, *munāfiqūn*, who claim to profess Islam while in truth they conceal hatred towards it. Qur'ānic exegesis creates a close affinity between three different verses pertaining to these people and ascribes to 'Umar a central role in their revelation. These are the verses in question:

Q 9:80 Ask pardon for them, or ask not pardon for them; if thou askest pardon for them seventy times, God will not pardon them; that, because they disbelieved in God and His messenger. God guides not the people of the ungodly.

Q 9:84 And pray thou never over any one of them when he is dead, nor stand over his grave; they disbelieved in God and His messenger, and died when they were ungodly.

Q 63:6 Equal it is for them, whether thou askest forgiveness for them or thou askest not forgiveness for them; God will never forgive them. God guides not the people of the ungodly.

A difference in interpretation

The attitude towards the hypocrites in these verses is not uniform, especially in Q 9:80. In its first part, the prophet is supposedly given free choice to decide whether to pray for the sinners or not. This permission does not conform to the final decree stated in the other verses, a decree that rules out *a priori* any option of forgiveness for the hypocrites. Muslim scholars were well aware of the exegetical difficulty that stems from the supposed authorization given to the prophet to ask forgiveness for the hypocrites in his prayers. They are almost unanimous in their claim that the verses that deny the option of forgiveness, Q 9:84 and Q 63:6, were revealed later than the one that allows it, Q 9:80, and consequently these are the verses that formulate the final Muslim attitude towards the hypocrites in Islam. This view is expressed in exegetical traditions dealing with the circumstances of the revelation of the verses above. All traditions focus on the image of 'Abd Allāh b. Ubayy, a leader among the Anṣār, the hypocrite *par excellence* in the Islamic tradition and the Muslim collective memory. The pardoning of his sins, thanks to the prophet's prayers, is the issue debated in the traditions, and the interdiction to pray for him is conveyed to Muḥammad in several ways.

The angel Gabriel

First, mention should be made of the version according to which it is the angel Gabriel who reveals to the prophet the total interdiction. According to this version, the prophet, basing himself on the permission embedded in Q 9:80, intended to pray for Ibn Ubayy who had just died. Gabriel seized him by his cloth and stopped him abruptly. He then revealed to Muḥammad Q 9:84 stating the total interdiction (al-Ṭabarī 1969: XIV, 407, no. 17053).

The prophet and ‘Umar confront

Other versions mention ‘Umar as the one who prevents the prophet from praying for Ibn Ubayy in the same manner the angel Gabriel did. This indicates ‘Umar’s sublime virtue as the one who guides the prophet towards God’s will, and in this case, he guides the prophet to the right interpretation of God’s intention as revealed in the Qur’ān. He is also responsible for further Qur’ānic revelations that render the interdiction to pray for Ibn Ubayy more decisive.

In one version, ‘Umar guides Muḥammad to what he believes is the right interpretation of Q 9:80 that had already been revealed. He relates that, as a Muslim, he made an almost unforgivable mistake. The prophet intended to pray for Ibn Ubayy, but he, ‘Umar, seized him by his cloth while reciting the verse quoted above and prevented him from carrying on. Muḥammad countered that this verse gave him a choice to pray for forgiveness for Ibn Ubayy or not to pray. Then Muḥammad approached the grave to pray for the deceased (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1997: VI, 1853–4, no. 10508).

In this version, ‘Umar, just like the angel Gabriel in the above version, is portrayed as seizing the prophet by his cloth to prevent him from approaching the grave of the hypocrite and offering the prayer. It is true that he deplored the use of force, which offended the prophet, but, to his mind, this lapse was necessary because the prophet intended to offer a forbidden prayer. The tradition offers no clue as to whether the prophet prayed or not. In any case, ‘Umar interpreted the verse rigorously while the prophet was more lenient in his interpretation. ‘Umar based his interpretation on the second part of the verse that states that God will never forgive the hypocrites, while Muḥammad focused on the beginning of the verse that gave him the option to choose whether to pray or not. Indeed, in another version it is reported that when verse Q 9:80 was revealed to him, he declared, “I hear my God allowing me to pray for them” (al-Suyūṭī 1985: III, 264). However, the fact that a Muslim, even ‘Umar, opposed the prophet on a point of interpretation of the Qur’ān is unforgivable by later Muslim standards: no one knows the true meaning of God’s revealed verses better than the prophet.

The controversy between the prophet and ‘Umar over the interpretation of that verse is described in yet another version. When Muḥammad expressed his wish to pray for Ibn Ubayy, ‘Umar asked him: “Did not God forbid you to pray for the hypocrites?” The prophet replied, “No, he gave me a choice to ask forgiveness for them or not to ask” (al-Ṭabarī 1969: XIV, 406–7, no. 17050–1; Ibn Ḥanbal n.d.: II, 18).

In one more version, 'Umar not only interprets the verse rigorously but also causes the revelation of another verse, Q 9:84, thus validating his opinion against that of the prophet:

'Abd Allāh b. Ubayy said to his son (named also 'Abd Allāh): "Go to the prophet and ask him to give me a cloth of his to use it for my shroud." 'Abd Allāh (the son) approached the prophet and said to him: "Messenger of God, you surely recognize 'Abd Allāh (the father) standing among his tribe. He ordered me to ask for one of your cloths to use it as his shroud and also to pray for him." The prophet gave him one of his cloths and intended to pray for him. But 'Umar said to him: "You know 'Abd Allāh and his hypocrisy, will you still pray for him even when God had forbidden you to do so?" The prophet asked him: "Where?" And 'Umar quoted (Q 9:80): "If thou askest pardon for them seventy times, God will not pardon them." The prophet said: "I will offer more (than seventy)." And then God revealed (Q 9:84): "And pray thou never over any one of them when he is dead, nor stand over his grave." (al-Ṭabarānī n.d.: XI, 438, no. 12244)

In this version, the prophet attempts to impose his moderate interpretation also on the second part of Q 9:80, where it is stated that even seventy prayers will not help the hypocrites obtain forgiveness. He intends to pray more than seventy prayers. But it is 'Umar who understands the meaning of the verse to be that the number seventy is only typological. As corroboration to his view God reveals Q 9:84, which expresses the interdiction with more finality. God agrees with 'Umar's symbolic and broad understanding of the verse and rejects the prophet's concrete and narrow interpretation.

An even more blatant approach of 'Umar towards the prophet is described in a different version. 'Umar reports:

When 'Abd Allāh b. Ubayy died the prophet was asked to pray for him. He stood over his grave to begin the prayer, but I confronted him, face to face, and said: "Messenger of God, will you pray for 'Abd Allāh b. Ubayy? The same Ibn Ubayy who said this and that on the day so and so?" And I started enumerating the days. The prophet smiled, but when I persisted, he said: "Back off! I was given a choice and I chose. It was revealed to me (Q 9:80): 'Ask pardon for them, or ask not pardon for them; if thou askest pardon for them seventy times, God will not pardon them'; If need be, I will pray more than seventy times to obtain forgiveness for their sins." Then he prayed for him, went to his funeral and stood over his grave until the end. 'Umar added: "I was amazed from what I did and from my boldness towards the prophet who knew better than I did. But I swear by God, soon enough this verse was revealed (Q 9:84), 'And pray thou never over any one of them when he is dead, nor stand over his grave; they disbelieved in God and His messenger, and died when they were ungodly.'" (Ibn Hishām 1995: IV, 151; Ibn Ḥanbal n.d.: I, 16)

In this version 'Umar behaves rudely towards the prophet, who is supposed to have more knowledge on the matter. And yet, it appears that 'Umar's rigorous understanding accords with that of God: a verse that ends the controversy and proves 'Umar right is revealed.

‘Umar not mentioned

Unlike these versions which describe a confrontation between the prophet and ‘Umar over a point of interpretation of God’s revelation, other versions do not mention ‘Umar at all, and consequently the affront to the prophet’s image as the highest authority on the interpretation and application of Qur’ānic precepts is removed. It is probable that these versions belong to a later layer than the ones quoted above and that they were put into circulation in order to rehabilitate the prophet’s image. In one of these versions, the prophet is described as praying for Ibn Ubayy and standing over his grave; then Q 9:84 is revealed that forbids this course of action (al-Ṭabarī 1969: XIV, 407, no. 17052). From this version it is obvious that the prophet never erred by taking a course of action opposing the revelation, since the verse that forbade it was revealed only after he finished praying for the hypocrite.

The Shī‘ī position

Here also, the Shī‘ī scholars go to extreme measures in order to refute any virtue attributed to ‘Umar. The versions describing the incident of the prayer for Ibn Ubayy, as quoted in Shī‘ī sources, have a different ending that puts ‘Umar to ridicule. One version circulated on the authority of the sixth Imām, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), reports that ‘Umar attempted to stop the prophet from praying for Ibn Ubayy; however, the prophet told him that he never intended to pray for him but to curse him and wish for him a destiny in hell (al-‘Ayyāshī 1991: II, 107, no. 94). In this way, ‘Umar is described as a hardheaded man who reacts unnecessarily because he has no confidence in the prophet’s judgment.

In another version, also circulated on the authority of al-Ṣādiq, the prophet answers ‘Umar, who stands in his way, that it was not his intention to pray for Ibn Ubayy nor to stand over his grave, but to honor his son who was a good Muslim. ‘Umar expresses his regrets and asks forgiveness for having angered God or His prophet (al-‘Ayyāshī 1991: II, 107–8, no. 95).

Conclusion

The agreements with God suggest that ‘Umar was an active partner in the revelation of several verses in the Qur’ān and consequently define his image as opposing that of the prophet. It is probable that the traditions describing these events were put into circulation at an early stage of the crystallization of the Islamic law, a stage where the ideal leader was the caliph. These traditions were never intended to damage the prophet’s image, for it is inconceivable that a Muslim in any era would do so. But at a later stage, Muslim scholars became aware of the damage to the prophet’s image and they put into circulation versions rehabilitating the prophet’s image and minimizing that of ‘Umar. Ultimately, the Muslim community rallied behind its prophet and not any of its caliphs.

Author note

This chapter is condensed from a chapter of my Tel Aviv PhD dissertation entitled “Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and the Image of the Ideal Leader in the Islamic Tradition,” under the supervision of Professor Uri Rubin, September 2003 (in Hebrew).

Further reading

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Rubin, Uri (1995) *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims*. Darwin Press, Princeton.

PART III

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CHAPTER 14

God

Andrew Rippin

As might be assumed to be so in the case of a religious text, the figure of God is an overwhelming and overarching presence in the Qurʾān. Understanding the nature of the figure of God as He is presented in the foundational text is manifestly a central task of anyone who wishes to achieve an understanding of the nature and outlook of Islam itself. Such a task is, given the quantity of theological reflection which already exists on the text, not a straightforward matter. In approaching the subject, we are immediately confronted by the challenge of the nature of language itself and the context in which talk about God is found. The challenge for the interested reader in coming to terms with the topic is substantial, for so many different tacks have been taken in the past in order to deal with the issue; some assistance may be provided here by a clear statement of perspective and approach at the outset.

Assessing the “poetic” (or “mythical” or “religious”) nature of the Qurʾān commences with an understanding that the text of scripture is an expression, distilled at a particular historical point in time, of human religious experience located within the broad context of the Near East. The Qurʾān participates within this context but does not depict all of it. It presents arguments and positions from within the overall context but it does not provide the reader with the full vision of that religious ethos. This is part of the dimension of what has been spoken of as the “referential” character of the Qurʾān (Wansbrough 1978: 1) but it may go further, since the possibility must be entertained that the Qurʾān is silent on some points of common religious assumption and makes no explicit reference to them as such. The establishment of a fixed text of scripture implies a moment in time into which a tradition of thinking puts itself,

resulting in an enunciation of its understanding at that time, limited by the extent of its own self-reflection. This limitation implied by this distillation of the text into a fixed canon does not mean that the project of struggling with the text must be renounced. But it does indicate that it is a project which must proceed with considerable deliberation and appropriate modesty in expectations of one's accomplishments.

Fundamentally the issue which must be confronted focuses on the language of the Qur'ān. Our task becomes one of looking at the symbolic language used in speaking of God. In dealing with expressions related to the divine, the subject of study becomes not a matter of one "thing" being "symbolized" as another in the manner of a literary figure. Rather, what is at stake is the way in which "things" are "captured" in language in a form which is necessarily symbolic due to the use of language itself. It is here that Paul Ricoeur's maxim, "metaphor gives rise to thought," has its meaning: in expressing something in language, thinking about that "thing" becomes possible. Metaphor, or symbol as I use that word here, creates new possibilities of imagination and thought. Such symbols work within systems of narrative to create new alignments which structure existence on a personal and social level.

As Mohammed Arkoun has observed, God did not prove problematic in Classical Arabic or Islamic thinking: for Muslims of the classical period, God is well known and well presented in the Qur'ān. However, God has become problematic as an element of thought in the contemporary period, although that fact has not yet been widely perceived in the Muslim world. One example of a Muslim thinker who has broached the subject and taken up the challenge is Shabbir Akhtar (1990). Akhtar does not follow Arkoun into his "genuine religious issues like the consciousness of culpability, the eschatological perspective, or revelation as a springboard for mythical, or symbolic thinking" (Arkoun 1987: 23), but rather concerns himself with the defensibility of philosophical arguments for the existence of God and the possibility of revelation. However, the fundamental problem is more than simply an issue of the "unthinkable" in relation to contemporary paganism or secularism: it is also a recognition of the relationship of language to the divine. The result is that there is a need to rethink God today "in light of the new knowledge of language, mind, logic, and history" (Arkoun 1987: 15).

Now, what might that mean when it comes to speaking of God? Contemporary thought has come to recognize that, in considering the application of language to God, "either to equate human words with the divine reality or to see no relationship between them is inappropriate" (McFague 1982: 7). For example, the statement "God is king" does not suggest that God is literally a king as humans use that word to apply to other humans, but neither does it suggest that God is king by virtue of metaphor, thereby suggesting that God is, in fact, something other than a king in reality. That is, in defining metaphor, it is common to suggest that an identity between the word used metaphorically and the object referred to is not present; when we say "Zayd is a lion," we understand that Zayd is not a lion but has taken on some sense of the characteristics of a lion. In the case of God, on the other hand, it may well be asserted that He is both a king and not a king: it might be suggested that He encompasses both aspects. "God is king" is perhaps best spoken of as symbolic, conveying a sense that God is somehow beyond

language in that the words which are used dissolve into their opposites. It is here, then, that we enter into the mythological world of Near Eastern monotheism.

The language used to speak of the divine in the Qurʾān may necessarily be thought of as symbolic: the finitude of language must confront the infinitude of the godhead. How can there be any other way of speaking of God? Only within the concept of God's name might there be said to be a suggestion that language "fits," but, even then, only in the magical sense of language (that is, within the first stage of language as described by Northrop Frye 1982: 6–7). It might be argued that God remains "nameless" in the Qurʾān, at least to the extent that he is not given a personal or proper name, although the status of the word *Allāh* is certainly debated (see Anawati 1967; Gimaret 1988). However, the use of oaths in His name and the idea of Him "having the most beautiful names" (Q 7:180; 17:110; 20:8) are clearly significant. The repetitions of *bismi-llāh*, "in the name of God," throughout the text suggest that, through God's name, the reality of God may be invoked; this is magical language which at the same time (or even, thereby, perhaps) suggests that the word reaches the object named. Be that as it may, the Qurʾān employs a wide range of symbolic vocabulary in order to describe God, and the Qurʾān holds much of this range in common with the Near Eastern monotheistic world stemming back to ancient times. The distinctiveness of the Qurʾānic contribution to this discourse about God may be viewed by comparing its emphases and ranges with other (both earlier and later) manifestations of monotheist discourse. The sum of such an investigation is to see how the monotheistic spirit expressed itself in seventh-century Arabic. It is, at its basis, a comparative question as well as a conceptual one.

The images of God in relation to humanity as used in the Qurʾān have an ancient heritage. In asserting that fact we must be clear about how to separate these insights from those of the philological. The tendency is to see the assertion of a past usage as meaning that the past represents the original and true usage and that all later usages are derivative. Such are the pitfalls into which many studies of the Qurʾān have fallen. C. C. Torrey (1892) provides a classic example of this tendency in the way that his observations on Qurʾānic terminology and its parallels in the Bible led him only to the conclusion that Muḥammad was unoriginal. This is the historicist frame of mind at work.

One example adduced by Torrey regarding the word *kitāb* may be considered to illustrate the point. Torrey (1892: 9) acknowledges the Jewish and Christian usages of the symbol of the "book" (and speaks of it as being "borrowed" by Muḥammad) and knows of the image of the "divine book of reckoning" which "was common even before Mohammed." He connects this latter usage to a bill of sale which "was, of course, familiar enough among the Arabs." The leap from the monotheist imagery of the Near East to the historical reality of the Arabs of Mecca and Medina is the key to the historicist mode of thinking. The reality of mythical, symbolic discourse has been subsumed and rendered banal under the weight of establishing the reality of history in its atomistic elements. This, of course, is precisely the same process which the Muslim juridical tradition followed in its own way in order to establish a normative set of rules for conduct in society during the development of the Islamic ethos.

A comparative approach can be of some significance if the aims and the limitations of the method are clearly kept in mind. A successful (that is, meaningful) comparative methodology involves analogical comparisons in terms of systems, not in terms of isolated “bits and pieces,” always keeping in mind the suspicion that analogous processes within parallel cultural situations are likely to produce similar results. Comparisons need not involve the question of “origins” of particular items: the focus of interest moves to cultural patterns and symbolic systems. There is, it must be admitted, still a decision to be made regarding the general frameworks which are brought into any comparison – in the case of the Qur’ān, for example, whether one pursues a context of Arabia (however the society of the Arabs be defined: Bedouin and/or urban) or a context broadly conceived as the ancient Near Eastern religious world which is developed by Arkoun (2002: 114–25) into a notion of the “societies of the book.” It is the latter which makes good sense of the data and which acknowledges most profoundly the fundamental human religious impulse.

God as King

The expression of ideology through symbolism in the ancient world extended to mechanisms whereby human standards were supported, enhanced, and promoted. Such is the common background to the statement “God is king” for which we see analogous developments throughout the ancient Near East and beyond. A statement such as “God is king” legitimizes kingship as a human endeavor and sets the bounds for acceptable behavior by the human king – with the constant recognition that a mere mortal king will not necessarily reach the level of divine perfection (although, in some societies, the elevation of the king to divine status implied just that possibility, of course). The description of God being king (or queen, on some occasions) is found throughout ancient Near Eastern literature. Amon, Anu, Ashur, Ea, El, the Hittite gods, Ishtar, Marduk, and Nanna are all named as royalty. In the non-biblical ancient Near East, “Kingship belongs primarily to heaven. ‘King’ may be first and foremost the title of a ruling deity” (Eaton 1990: 379).

What does it mean to suggest that somebody is a king? That is, what is the semantic field and the associated imagery which goes along with “kingship”? Just what is meant by kingship? Power, authority, and justice are all linked in the concept. Kingship establishes a relationship between the king himself and the people of his territory, often with words such as subjects, servants, slaves, or citizens (the latter suggesting a sense of belonging and allegiance).

The Bible presents, like the Qur’ān, a (relatively) static tradition of the expression of Near Eastern monotheism. The Bible cannot be presumed to define the range of the symbolism said to be analogical to a text such as the Qur’ān, even less to provide the normative example by which all others may be compared. It does, however, furnish a convenient textual source from which comparative insights may begin. Thus, for our purposes here, we may observe that the image of a king within biblical vocabulary provides the following as being royal characteristics considered desirable for a king: wisdom, long life,

wealth, strength, majesty, and beauty. Royal trappings spoken of include a crown, bracelet, clothing, scepter, throne, platform, palace, and a royal court.

Furthermore, in terms of symbolism of the language of the Bible, we must keep in mind that the primary focus suggests the qualities of relationship, for the relational quality of a symbol – the sense in which one “thing” relates to another through metaphor – underlies the entire structure. In that light, G. B. Caird (1980: 177) observes that “in the Bible the five metaphors in most common use to express God’s relationship with his worshipers are king:subject, judge:litigant, husband:wife, father:child, and master:servant.” It is important to remember that, in such analyses, we are looking at a whole range of vocabulary which is interlocked into a metaphorical whole. Each of the individual elements themselves may not be significant (or may be thought to be given a significance beyond what is called for); however, the point remains that when one looks at the vocabulary as a whole, the metaphorical picture emerges.

There are, according to my reading of the Qur’ān, three major ranges of symbolism used in talking of God in the Qur’ān: the divine warrior-king, the divine judge, and the divine covenantor: that is, in Caird’s terms, king:subject, judge:litigant, and master:servant. These three are clearly interrelated and a good deal of overlap may be seen between them. Furthermore, such ranges of vocabulary bring us directly into the discussion of other central parts of monotheistic symbolism: eschatology, cosmology, personal responsibility, and the creation of community. Such a point only emphasizes the fact that “king” (*malik*) as a word is not being used simply as a metaphor but rather that it conveys an entire symbolic universe conveniently summarized as monotheism. Much traditional scholarship has not viewed matters this way; the absence of virtually all of the following vocabulary from the “standard” scholarly works on metaphor in the Qur’ān (see, e.g., Sabbagh 1943; Sister 1931) indicates the limited view of language that previous scholarship has labored under. The language of which we speak here has been taken as “mere anthropomorphism” for scholarship up to this point and is (thus) conceived of as something separate from “metaphor.”

God is King

Say: “I find refuge with the Lord of the people, the King of the people, the god of the people, from the evil of the slinking whisperer who whispers in the breasts of the people, of jinn and people.” (Q 114:1–6)

God is king, *malik* (Q 20:114; 23:116; 59:23; 114:2; in Q 3:26 *mālik* is used). Q 114:1–3 states, “Say: ‘I take refuge with the Lord of men, the King of men, the God of men.’”¹ He possesses (always *li-llāh*; God is generally not described as “ruling” His kingdom) a kingdom (*mulk*) “of the heavens and the earth”: see Q 2:107; 3:189; 5:17, 18, 40, 120; 7:158; 9:116; 24:42; 25:2, etc. Note should also be made of Q 3:26 where God is *mālik al-mulk*, and Q 6:73, 17:111, and 22:56 which speak of His kingdom, which He holds in His hand according to Q 67:1: “Blessed is He in whose hand is the *mulk*.” He sits upon a throne, *kursī* (Q 2:255 – the throne is “the heavens and the earth”; cf. Q 38:34 in reference to Solomon’s throne) and *‘arsh* (Q 7:54; 9:129; 10:3; 11:7; 13:2; 17:42; 20:5;

21:22; 23:86, 116; 25:59; 27:26; 32:4; 39:75; 40:7, 15; 43:82; 57:4; 69:17; 81:20; 85:15). Eight of those passages are in the context of the creation story (O'Shaughnessy 1973), which perhaps suggests we are encountering a remnant of an enthronement ritual; most of the others speak of "the Lord of the throne" indicating the close connection between kingship and having a throne. The throne of kingship is surrounded by the king's retinue of angels (Q 39:75; 40:7; and 69:17; in the latter two verses the angels bear the throne). The image is reinforced in Q 89:22 in which the troops of angels are under the king's command: "Your Lord comes with the angels row by row." The king sits in charge of his treasuries, *khazā'in* (Q 6:50; 11:31), and places His adornments, *zīna*, within His kingdom (Q 7:32; also Q 37:6 where the stars are the adornments of heaven). He uses His seal, *khatama*, to confirm his actions (Q 2:7). The same image appears in sealing, *ṭaba'á* (Q 4:155; 9:93; 16:108; 30:59; 40:35; 47:16). He can also designate *ātā*, subsidiary kingships (Q 2:247–58), and give authority, *sulṭān* (e.g., Q 3:151; 11:96; 17:80; 23:45; 40:23).

The main characteristic of the king is found in the exercise of power, *qūwa* (Q 2:165; 18:39; 51:58) echoed in the notion of strength, *qawā* (Q 8:52; 11:66; 22:40, etc.). He uses this strength to render His kingdom subservient, *sakhkhara*, for the benefit of His citizens (e.g., Q 22:65; 31:20; 45:12). His citizens are His servants, *'ibād* (Q 3:182; 8:51; 37:40, etc.), who serve Him, *'abada* (Q 2:83; 3:64; 4:36, etc.), and who are protected, *walī*, *mawlā*, by their relationship to the king (Q 2:107, 120; 3:150; 8:40; 42:44, etc.). His citizens are also those who submit, *aslama* (e.g., Q 2:112; 3:20; 4:125; 27:44; 31:22 – one always submits one's *wajh*, perhaps invoking an image of not gazing upon the king [see also Rippin 2000]; also Q 16:87, *salam*), as well as simply his people, *nās*. In controlling the population, the king gives permission, *idhn*, for certain actions (Q 10:59; 20:109; 24:36; 34:23; 42:21; 53:26; 78:38 and the phrase *bi-idhn allāh, passim*, e.g., Q 2:97, 102, 249, 251), can make a proclamation, *adhān* (Q 9:3; verbally in Q 7:167; 14:7; 41:47), and charges his citizens, *kallaḥa*, with responsibilities (Q 2:233, 286; 6:152; 7:42; 23:62; 65:7).

The king also manifests His power as a warrior. He has enemies, *a'dū'* (Q 2:98; 8:60; 9:114; 41:19, 28; 60:1), and He is an enemy of others (Q 2:98; 20:39). Opponents can be overthrown, *arkasa* (Q 4:88), however. In His actions as warrior, He initiates war, *ḥaraba* (Q 2:279), is able to destroy His opponents, *dammara* (Q 47:10) and *ahlaka* (Q 7:164; 28:78; 67:28); He can seize them, *akhadha* (Q 3:11; 6:46; 8:52; 40:21–2; 79:25), and distribute the spoils of war, *afā'a* (Q 33:50; 59:6; 59:7). People are unable to defend themselves, *mana'á* (Q 59:2), against His onslaught. He assails, *qātala* (Q 9:30; 63:4), and kills, *qatala* (Q 8:17), and throws things, *ramā* (Q 8:17), against the enemy.

God as Judge

As king, God also sets the law: He commands, *amara* (Q 2:27, 67, 222; 4:58; 7:28; 13:21, 25; 16:90), He rules, *ḥakama* (Q 2:113; 4:141; 5:1; 7:87; 10:109; 12:80; 13:41; 22:69; 39:3; 40:48; and uses of *ḥukm*, *ḥākim*, and *ḥakīm*), He declares things forbidden, *ḥarrama* (Q 5:72; 6:150, 151; 9:29, 37; 17:33; 25:68) and *nahā* (Q 7:20; 60:8, 9), and permitted, *aḥalla* (Q 2:275; 5:87; 66:1). His citizens must obey His commands, *aṭā'a*

(Q 4:13, 69, 80, etc.): “These are the limits set by God and whoever obeys God and His messenger will enter paradise under which rivers flow, abiding therein forever.”

This imagery of God, the king, then moves quite easily into God, the judge. God stands in relationship to his people – his servants, slaves, submitters – not only as king but also as judge. This, too, is a symbol of ancient heritage, most powerfully, but by no means solely, used within eschatology. The role of reward and punishment in this life is linked to God making decisions on this subject and those people subject to His decisions implore him, via whatever means are available to them, to be merciful. The king is the one who is viewed as responsible for establishing, promulgating, and enforcing the entire judicial system, although in ancient society, as today, lesser officials are actually responsible for the administration of the law.

The Qurʾān displays an extensive vocabulary which speaks of God in his relationship to humanity within the terms of the judiciary. God decides *qaḍā* (Q 40:20, God decides with truth, eschatological; Q 15:66 context of Lot; Q 17:4, 23; 33:36; 40:20, etc.), judges people innocent, *barraʿa* (Q 33:69 in the context of Moses; also 9:1 but disputed as to meaning), pronounces judgment, *afatā* (Q 4:127, 176, both in a legal context), forgives, *ghafara* (for example, Q 3:135; 4:48; 48:2, etc.; God is *al-ghafūr*), gives charges (Q 4:12, where the word puns with *wasīya* as an inheritance; that is, God’s *waṣīya* is a legacy which people must implement and it is a requirement with which we are charged; the verbal use of the second form [*waṣṣā*] in Q 6:144 and of the fourth form [*yūṣṣiya*] in Q 4:11 make this clearer), grants pardons, *ʿafā* (Q 3:155; 5:95, 101; 9:43; God is *al-ʿafū*, the All-pardoning). One makes a complaint to God in His role as judge, *ishtakā* (Q 58:1; note the use of the first verbal form, to complain to God, Q 12:86), and one argues one’s case before Him, *jādala* (Q 4:109; 11:74; 16:111 in an eschatological setting). God is the reckoner in regard to the decisions He makes, *ḥasīb* (Q 4:6, 86, 33:39 and God calculates the account, *ḥisāb*, Q 2:202; 3:19, 199; 5:4; 14:51; 24:39; 40:17). God is the one who decides what is just, deeming things *aqsat*, more just (Q 33:5). He has a measure by which He does this, *qadr* (Q 6:91; 22:74; 39:67). Interceding, *shafaʿ*, is at the discretion of God (Q 10:18; 39:43–4). A judicial context is suggested by God bearing witness, *shahida* (Q 2:140, 204; 3:18, 4:166; 5:106; 9:107; 11:54; 59:11; 63:1; God is also *al-shahīd*), although the question of to whom God bears witness (i.e., who is the judge in such statements) is left open. God also gives testimonies, *shahāda* (Q 2:140; 5:106).

The greatest manifestation of God as judge occurs, of course, in the realm of the eschaton about which much has been written (see, e.g., Rippin 1996). Suffice it to mention that God rules over the record books and the balance, and makes the final decision on the fate of the individual. The dimensions of God writing, teaching, blotting out, and annulling all add to this.

God and His Covenant

The imagery of the covenantal aspect of the divine does not clearly separate itself from either the kingly aspect or the judging character of God. There is a contractual nature underlying the idea of God as the judge such that there is an agreement between God

and His citizens according to which God will judge. This is the basis of a covenant. Likewise, the acceptance of God as king is based upon a covenantal agreement of protection and honor. Some of the further extensions of the image of covenanting, however, move into domestic symbolism for example, suggesting a conceptual range that is distinct.

The covenants of God, *mīthāq* and *‘ahd*, describe a prominent theme in the Qur’ān, being mentioned some seventy-five times in total. The covenants are agreements which God (primarily, although the words are also used in secular contexts: see below) sets up and to which people respond, but which implement an obligation on both sides: in Q 2:40 God says to the Children of Israel, “fulfill My covenant and I shall fulfill your covenant” (*‘ahd* in both cases). Elements often connected to the idea of a covenant, especially if such are understood within the context of treaty agreements, are to be found in the Qur’ānic presentation of God, but one would not want to push the connection too far since such aspects do not form into one cohesive picture of a treaty-covenant but are rather scattered: God swears by things, *aqsama* (Q 56:75; 69:38; 70:40; 75:1, 2; 81:15; 84:16; 90:1), and curses, *la’ana*, those who violate His commands – that is, those who are unbelievers and thus remain outside His covenant (Q 2:88, 159; 4:46, 52, 118; 5:60; 9:68; 33:57; 47:23 and also seven times nominally). Making a breach in the covenant, *shāqqa*, incurs God’s wrath (Q 8:13; 59:4). For those who follow God’s will, He is their protector, *awlā* and *walī*, as well as a guardian, *wakīl* and *ḥafīz*. The imagery here is of a group of people brought together for mutual protection and benefit. It has been suggested in previous scholarship that the Qur’ān also pictures the primary covenant as being between the prophet and God, and through the prophet, the community is brought into the bond, as in Q 3:81 and 33:7.

God of the House

These people exist under the covenant within a domestic arrangement with God: God is master, *rabb*, within God’s house. God’s house, *bayt*, has been provided for humanity in this life: the heavens are the roof, *binā’* (Q 40:64), and the earth a mattress, *firāsh* (Q 2:22), such that all of creation is God’s handiwork, *ṣun’* (Q 27:88); God’s abode, *dār*, will be provided to his servants in the hereafter (e.g., Q 2:94; 6:32, 135). The term *dār al-islām*, while not found in the Qur’ān as such, is an extension of the Qur’ānic sense of domestic space under God’s rule. *Dār al-salām* is found in the Qur’ān (Q 10:25) and may refer to the life of a Muslim in the here and now. God is the light, *nūr*, in this domain (Q 5:15; 9:32; 24:35; 61:8).

Within His covenantal relationship in his house, God is the provider of sustenance, *rizq* (e.g., Q 2:212; 3:37), the absence of which he lets the disobedient taste, *adhāqa* (Q 16:112; 39:26). All the world provides the bounties of God, *ālā’* (Q 7:69, 74), the sacred things, *ḥurumāt* (Q 22:30), and the bounds, *ḥudūd* (Q 2:187, 229, 230; 4:13; 9:112; 58:4; 65:1). There is, therefore, manifested within such language, a fatherly image of the old man who takes care of his household by providing what is required. But this is as far as the fatherly image goes: it remains within a range that may be

associated with the provider of a covenant without suggesting the establishment of a family bond. Finally, it may be noted that God is lord, *rabb* (used twenty times), but He is not shepherd, a fact which emphasizes the urban orientation of much of the Qur'ānic symbolism, as illustrated more fully by the commercial symbolism associated with eschatology (Rippin 1996).

The Meaning of the Symbolic God

It may be seen that the symbolism of "God is king" stretches widely in the Qur'ān with an emphasis on the role of the king as warrior but extending into the other dimensions of the judge and the covenantor. These three ranges do not, of course, exhaust the Qur'ānic language of speaking of God: God talks, calls, answers, sees, hears, lives, blesses, helps, gives life, creates – all elements which could be argued to combine to say that God lives a moral life, although this is a life which is *not* our human life because it is "up there" from where things must be sent down, *nazzala*, *anzala*, and to where they must be raised up, *rafa'a*. As G. B. Caird (1980: 178; also see McFague 1982: 149–50) has said, "the application of these terms [of human existence] to God establishes ideal and absolute standards which can be used as instruments for the remaking of man in God's likeness."

As humans, we wish to think of God – and language is used in such a way as to express our wishes – through the most powerful symbols available. The figure of God, the "king," presents the ultimate vision of kingship, fulfilling every human expectation and going beyond them. God is the ideal king; God is the enactment of the moral stance to which human kings may aspire but which they will never attain. In speaking of the biblical usage of image for God, Caird (1980: 19) suggests that,

[w]hen the Bible calls God judge, king, father or husband it is, in the first instance, using the human known to throw light on the divine unknown, and particularly God's attitude to his worshippers. But no sooner has the metaphor travelled from earth to heaven than it begins the return journey to earth, bearing with it an ideal standard by which the conduct of human judges, kings, fathers and husbands is to be assessed.

Underlying this is a point that is the central teaching of the Near Eastern monotheist tradition: that we are, as individuals, responsible for our fate both in this world and the next. There is no special power which is going to make us into what we are not; not even kings are excluded from this reality. The empowering and explanatory power of this myth comes in its provision of a resolution of human despair and alienation, by putting off that resolution until the hereafter, in which God, as king, will enact the fullest and most moral rule, enacting fully what it means to be a king. But the point would seem to be more, for the symbolism also conveys an ethic for practice. The stress falls, symbolically, on fairness: God deals with us fairly in His role as a king (and thus the emphasis on judgeship also); so, too, should we deal fairly with our fellow humans. This is an element of the teaching regarding personal responsibility. The symbolism not only makes the

reader aware of a dimension of life beyond the mundane and her responsibility in regards to it, but also of the significance of this life as a reflection of the divine realm.

Such observations apply to all language about God. But the question remains of the Qur'ān's special contribution to the discussion. There are a few remarkable areas of absence of symbolism related to God, although they need more exploration and documentation than the present context allows. Enthronement, a central motif of biblical kingship in speaking of God, is present only to the extent of the central part played by the throne itself. There is no liturgical invocation of the process of becoming king, so crucial in the biblical picture (Eaton 1990: 381). The linking of this process in the Bible to "anointing" (a particularly Christian notion in which Jesus as God is the kingly David, not a motif of the Hebrew Bible), however, may well provide the clue as to the "truncated" nature of this reference. This is especially so when the other major range of symbolism which is absent is noted: the fact that there is hardly any family imagery for God in the Qur'ān is unmistakable. Certainly God loves, *aḥabba* (also *ḥubb*), and shows compassion, *rahma* etc., towards His people to whom He also extends a bond, *ḥabl* (Q 3:103, 112), and he is the guardian, *ḥafīz* (Q 42:6; also *ḥāfīz*, Q 12:64), and also Lord (*rabb*), but God is *not* the father, He is *not* married to his people, His sons do *not* populate the earth. The Qur'ān, it must be concluded, speaks from a "sectarian milieu," as Wansbrough felicitously put it, within the Arkounian "societies of the book": the avoidance of ranges of symbolism in talking of God that resound powerfully within Christian circles is conspicuous.

It is at this point that we must deal with the argument that history must play a role in interpretation: the suggestion may be put forth that kingship was a concept familiar to the seventh-century Arabs, having at least been known from South Arabia. Thus, it might be said, the image of kingship should not be contextualized with the ancient Near East but within seventh-century Arabia and the absence of certain themes such as enthronement and family relations reflects a historical situation familiar to the Arabs at the time of revelation. Such, of course, may be true but, as a reading strategy, it isolates one factor without taking into account a sufficiently broad vision of what the Qur'ān is about. Once again, this is also a situation which the Muslim interpretive tradition has encouraged in its historicization of the text of the Qur'ān, most fully embedded in the *sīra* material and the concept of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* ("occasions of revelation").

The issue of what to make of all this must be taken much further, however. Understanding the nature of metaphor and symbol, especially in relationship to speaking of God, has a number of implications. Metaphors come and go in language and in culture, reflecting the priorities and principles of a historical age. In discussing these issues in the context of Christianity, Sallie McFague (1987) raises the point of whether these metaphors are appropriate to today's world. Speaking from an ecological and feminist position, McFague argues that models of God based upon male, kingly domination of the world and of women are destructive, not only to the potential of one half of the human population, but also to the earth as a place of human habitation. "[I]n the monarchical model, God is distant from the world, related only to the human world, and controls that world through domination and benevolence" (McFague 1987: 65). She suggests that the process of deconstructing the metaphors which we have inherited

from the ancient Near East is essential to human survival. But, what is more, we must re-mythologize in a manner appropriate to today's ethos and ethic. She proposes the profoundly appropriate metaphor – within the Christian context certainly – of “the world as God's body” and of “God the mother.” To what extent such metaphors would be productive within an Islamic context is a matter for continued discussion and debate.

Note

- 1 The isolation of the vocabulary treated in this chapter is facilitated by the concordance constructed by Kassis (1983: 3–99), which separates out all the verbal roots used in association with God.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 15

Prophets and Prophethood

Uri Rubin

Stories about the Prophets

The Qurʾān abounds with stories about prophets who have been sent by God before Muḥammad. The reports about them, it is asserted, are being related to Muḥammad by God (Q 7:101; 11:100, 120; 18:13; 20:99). They are sometimes described as “stories of the unseen,” because they happened long ago and the prophet did not witness them in person (Q 3:44 [of Maryam]; Q 11:49 [of Noah]; Q 12:102 [of Joseph]). Their major aim is to relate how prophets and messengers throughout history were rejected by their respective peoples, and thereby “to strengthen” Muḥammad’s heart in his own mission to his contemporary unbelievers (Q 11:120). These stories are also designed to teach Muḥammad’s audience the bitter lesson of disobedience which already led ancient towns to destruction (Q 9:70).

Many of the stories draw on biblical themes. Some appear in a condensed form, while other stories, such as those of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, are given in elaborate detail and even with subtle revisions of the biblical accounts. Elements not known from the Bible appear mainly in stories about the non-biblical prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ.

The Qurʾān is aware of the affinity between the stories about the prophets and biblical literature, for which reason the Jews and the Christians are called upon to testify to the truth of the Qurʾānic allusions to the previous prophets. This is, at least, how Muslim exegetes explain the meaning of Q 16:43 (see also Q 21:7), which says: “And We did not send before you any but humans to whom We sent revelation: so ask the people of the reminder if you do not know.” The exegetes (e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: IV, 449; al-Qurṭubī 1967: X, 108) say that the “people of the reminder” (*ahl al-dhikr*) are believers from the

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People of the Book, that is, Jews and Christians well versed in the Torah and the Gospel, which means that they know the history of the prophets from their own scriptures, and can confirm the truth of the Qur'ānic allusions to them.

The list of prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān is not complete, in the sense that some of them were left out on purpose. This is stated in Q 40:78 (see also Q 4:164): "And certainly We sent messengers before you: there are some of them of whom We related to you and there are others of whom We have not related to you." Some exegetes explain that the prophets were too many to mention, and according to some, there were 124,000 prophets (al-Bayḍāwī 1988: II, 346). Others suggest that some prophets were not distinguished enough to be mentioned, as in the case of a prophet who was an Ethiopian slave (al-Suyūṭī 1985: V, 357).

Status of the Prophets

The prophets emerge in succession. The Qur'ān says that they were sent "one after another (Q 2:87), or "one by one" (Q 23:44). Moreover, the prophets belong to the same genealogical descent. Thus Q 19:58 reads: "These are the prophets on whom God bestowed favors, of the seed of Adam, and of those whom We carried with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel." The same idea is conveyed in Q 6:84, in which it is stated about Abraham: "And We gave to him Isaac and Jacob; each did We guide, and Noah We guided before, and of his descendants David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Aaron."

The fact that the prophets are said to have been "guided" by God means that they represent a divinely chosen pedigree, as is indicated, for example, in Q 3:33–4: "Surely God chose (*iṣṭafā*) Adam and Noah and the house of Abraham and the house of 'Imrān above all beings. (They are) the offspring one of the other." The chosen prophetic lineage begins here with Adam, which indicates that he too is considered a prophet. The house of 'Imrān stands for Moses (the son of the biblical Amram), but can also refer to Jesus whose mother Mary is considered a member of that house.

The verb *iṣṭafā*, which signifies here divine election, recurs in more verses dealing with prophets, as well as with angels. Thus in Q 22:75 it is stated that God chooses (*yaṣṭafī*) messengers from among the angels and from among the people. The same verb is used to describe election of individual prophets, such as Abraham (Q 2:130), Moses (Q 7:144), and Mary (Q 3:42), as well as of kings, namely Saul (*Ṭālūt*) (Q 2:247).

Another verb, *ijtabā*, also denotes divine election of prophets (Q 6:87), such as Adam (Q 20:122), Abraham (Q 16:121), Joseph (Q 12:6), and Jonah (Q 68:50). Less frequent is the verb *ikhtāra*, which denotes the same type of divine election (Q 44:32), and describes the election of Moses (Q 20:13). The latter's election is also conveyed by the verb *iṣṭana'a* (Q 20:41).

The divine election of the prophets provides them with abilities not shared by ordinary humans. This pertains mainly to knowledge of the unseen. Thus in Q 72:26–7 it is stated that God knows the unseen, and He does not reveal His secrets to anyone, except to a messenger with whom He is well pleased. In Q 3:179 we are told again that God

does not make people acquainted with the unseen, but He “chooses (*yajtabī*) of His messengers whom He pleases.”

Virtues of Individual Prophets

Some prophets possess unique traits that mark their singular status among the rest of the prophets. Abraham is described in Q 4:125 as one whom God took as a friend (*khalīl*). Moses is described as “pure” (Q 19:51) and as one whom God brought near in communion (Q 19:52), and with whom God spoke (*kallama*) (Q 4:164). This is the origin of Moses’ title, *kalīm Allāh*, by which he is known in Islamic tradition. Tradition also elaborates on Moses’ communion with God.

Later tradition has provided Muḥammad with a title of his own, namely, *ḥabīb Allāh* (“God’s beloved”), which, together with the previous prophets, completes the unique group of prophets having an intimate relationship with God. In fact, Muslim tradition has elaborated on Muḥammad’s honorific titles and produced long lists of them.

The guided and divinely chosen prophets possess moral virtues that render them immune to misbehavior of any kind. Thus in Q 3:161 it is stated that it is not attributable to a prophet that he should act unfaithfully. The election of the prophets has made them belong to the righteous, a fact stated regarding several of them, for example Zechariah, John, Jesus, Elias (Q 6:85), and others. John is described in Q 3:39 as honorable and chaste and a prophet from among the righteous. Some of them are also described as truthful, as are Abraham (Q 19:41) and Idrīs (Q 19:56). Ishmael is described in Q 19:54 as “truthful in his promise.”

Ranks of Prophets

The existence of distinguished groups among the prophets is a fact which the Qurʾān declares openly. Q 17:55 states that God has made some of the prophets to excel others, and in Q 2:253 the same statement is repeated, alongside names of some of the excelling prophets: “We have made some of these messengers to excel the others, among them are they to whom God spoke (*kallama*), and some of them He exalted by (many degrees of) rank; and We gave clear arguments to Jesus son of Mary, and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit.”

A special group of God’s messengers is mentioned in Q 46:35, being called “those endowed with constancy (*ūlū ʾl-ʾazm*).” The Qurʾān says that they have borne patiently (the hardships of their mission), and Muslim exegetes are not unanimous as to who they were. Some say that they were those who established a law (*sharīʿa*) among their nations, like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, as well as Muḥammad. Others hold that they were those who suffered the hardest trials, or the deepest remorse. In the latter case, they include Jacob, Joseph, Job, and David, in addition to the five prophets already mentioned. But still others contend that all the prophets were *ūlū ʾl-ʾazm* (for the various views see al-Qurṭubī 1967: XVI, 220–1).

Modes of Prophetic Revelation

Various verbs convey the idea of prophetic revelation, the most frequent being those derived from the root *n-z-l*, namely, *nazzala* and *anzala*. They denote an act of bringing down, which means that the prophetic revelation is perceived as being sent down from heaven. Occasionally, the revelation itself is described as descending (*nazala*, *tanazzala*), without specifying the agent that causes it to come down. A common name of the Qur'ānic revelation is *tanzīl* (e.g., Q 20:4; 26:192; 32:2, etc.), that is, "bringing down." A less common name is *amr* ("affair"), which in Q 65:12 is said to have been descending (*yatanazzalu*) through the seven heavens. Some exegetes explain that the "affair" stands here for divine revelation that is being brought down from heaven to earth (Muqātil 1989: IV, 367).

Revelation originates in God, as is indicated in verses in which God speaks in the first person: "I have sent down (the Qur'ān)" (Q 2:41), and more often: "We have sent down (the Qur'ān)" (e.g., Q 44:3; 76:23; 97:1). But revelation does not come down directly to the prophets. The intermediate agents are the angels. God sends them down with the revelations, as is implied in Q 16:2: "He sends down (*yunazzilu*) the angels with the spirit by His commandment on whom He pleases of His servants..." Muslim exegetes hold, however, that only Gabriel is meant here, the angel who was commissioned to bring down prophetic revelations, or the "spirit," to Muḥammad (e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: IV, 428). In Q 16:102 the agent bringing down (*nazzalahu*) the Qur'ānic revelation is himself called "the holy spirit (*rūḥ al-qudus*), which is again interpreted as an epithet of Gabriel (e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: IV, 491). The same applies to Q 26:193, in which the revelation is brought down (*nazala bihi*) by the "faithful spirit" (*al-rūḥ al-amīn*; e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VI, 144). Similarly, the exegetes say that it is Gabriel who says to the prophet in Q 19:64: "We do not descend (with revelations) but by the command of your Lord" (e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: V, 248–9).

As far as Muḥammad's own prophetic experience is concerned, the process of sending down revelations ends at the prophet's heart, and Gabriel is mentioned explicitly as the one who brings it down to him (Q 2:97). The Qur'ān provides specific, though not entirely coherent, details of the time when the revelation began coming down to Muḥammad. This took place either on a "blessed night" (Q 44:3), or on *laylat al-qadr*, the "night of power" (Q 97:1), or during the month of Ramaḍān (Q 2:185). Most exegetes explain that all passages refer to one and the same night, namely *laylat al-qadr*, which falls in Ramaḍān (e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VII, 336 [on Q 44:3]; I, 187 [on Q 2:185]).

There are various terms denoting the actual revelation that is being brought down. Most often it is called "signs" (*āyāt*, e.g., Q 57:9, etc.), which commentators of the Qur'ān have identified with the Qur'ānic verses (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VIII, 163). Elsewhere, what God sends down is called *sūra* (Q 9:86, etc.), which term came to be identified with the Qur'ānic chapters, and most obviously, the term Qur'ān, too, stands for something which God sends down (Q 76:23). Another locution standing for a whole unit of revelations being sent down is *kitāb*, a "book," or "scripture" (e.g., Q 7:2). Specific scriptures, namely "the Torah and the Gospel," are also described as being sent down by

God (Q 3:3–4), which implies that all monotheistic scriptures represent the same divine revelation. Metaphorical terms are also used to describe a descending revelation, one of which being the somewhat obscure title *furqān* (Q 3:4). Some exegetes have explained it in the sense of a scripture distinguishing between truth and falsehood (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: I, 350). “Light” (*nūr*) is also a name for the guiding revelation that God has sent down (Q 64:8).

Another widely current verb denoting the act of providing revelation is *awḥā*, with *wahy* as the noun denoting the revelation itself. The verb means to “prompt,” “inspire,” or “suggest,” but it is not confined to prophetic revelations. Occasionally it simply means to “instruct,” or “command,” as in Q 8:12 in which God instructs (*yūḥī*) the angels to support the believers. In Q 99:5 God instructs (*awḥā*) earth to tell its story on the day of resurrection, and in Q 16:68 He instructs (*awḥā*) the bee to make hives in the mountains, etc. Even when prophets are addressed, the verb *awḥā* can be a request to act rather than imparting a text for recitation. Thus in Q 23:27 God instructs (*awḥaynā*) Noah to make the Ark, and in Q 7:117 God prompts (*awḥaynā*) Moses to cast his rod. An act designated as *awḥā* can also be performed by humans. In Q 19:11, for example, Zechariah signals (*awḥā*) to his people that they should glorify God morning and evening. In most cases, however, *awḥā* stands for an act performed by God Himself, as in Q 41:12. Here God reveals (*awḥā*) the “affair” (*amr*) of the seven heavens, that is, enjoins His commandment on the heavens. But what God reveals mostly as *wahy* is the prophetic inspiration itself. This is the case in Q 42:52 in which God reveals (*awḥaynā*) a “spirit” to His prophet. The spirit has been interpreted here as standing for the Qur’ānic revelation (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VII, 298). This accords with Q 53:4–5 in which the Qur’ān is explicitly described as a revelation (*wahy*) that is revealed (*yūḥā*). In Q 35:31 it is the “book” that has been revealed as *wahy*.

The revelation (*wahy*) of a given Qur’ānic passage can be a prolonged process, as is the case with the revelation of a given Muḥammad. He is advised not to make haste before the process is completed (Q 20:114). When the reception of the *wahy* is completed the prophet is supposed to recite it in public (Q 29:45). The same process of *wahy* was experienced also by previous prophets, as is stated in Q 4:163: “Surely We have revealed (*awḥaynā*) to you as We revealed to Noah, and the prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon.”

The *wahy* does not always come directly from God to the prophets. An angel acting as God’s messenger may deliver the divine *wahy* to them. This comes out in Q 42:51, in which it is stated: “It is not for any mortal that God should speak to them, except by inspiration (*wahy*) or from behind a veil (*hijāb*), or by sending a messenger (*rasūl*), to reveal (*fa-yūḥīya*) by His permission what he will.” The exegetes say that the messenger delivering the *wahy* is Gabriel (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VII, 297).

As for the contents of what is being revealed as *wahy*, in some cases it consists of the sheer idea of monotheism. Thus in Q 21:108 it is stated: “Say: It is only revealed (*yūḥā*) to me that your God is one God.” In other cases the *wahy* revolves around specific legal obligations. God reveals (*awḥaynā*) to the previous prophets “the doing of good and the keeping up of prayer and the giving of alms” (Q 21:73). The Qur’ān repeats several

times the injunction given to the prophet to follow what has been revealed (*yūḥā*) to him (e.g., Q 10:109; 33:2, etc.).

In Q 17:39 the content of the *waḥy* is defined as “wisdom,” which seems to refer to moral lessons which must be derived from the history of past generations. This is confirmed by the fact that in Q 11:49 the *waḥy* consists of “accounts of the unseen,” i.e., stories of the history of past generations which are now being revealed to the prophet. The stories deal with sinful nations which God punished and destroyed because they had rejected their prophets.

There are also other, less frequent, terms of prophetic revelation, one of which being to “cast” (*alqā*), as in Q 40:15. Here God is said to have cast “the inspiration by His command upon whom He pleases of His servants.” In Q 28:86 it is the Book that has been cast unto the prophet, while in Q 77:5 some unspecified persons are mentioned who are described as “casting the reminder” (*faʿl-mulqiyāt dhikr*). The exegetes say that the “reminder” signifies the prophetic inspiration, and that those who cast it are the angels who deliver it to God’s prophets and messengers (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VIII, 446).

“To give” (*ātā*) may also signal prophetic revelation, as is the case in Q 2:87, in which God “gives” Moses “the book.” Another verb, *alḥama* (root: *l-h-m*), also denotes divine inspiration, but not specifically prophetic. Thus in Q 91:8 it is indicated that God has inspired (*fa-alḥamahā*) the human soul to understand what is right and wrong for it.

Dreams (*ruʿyā*) may also function as prophetic visions. Abraham found out by such a dream that he had to sacrifice his son (Q 37:105), and Muḥammad knew from his own dream that he was about to enter Mecca safely (Q 48:27). Another vision of the prophet, which is mentioned in Q 17:60, was interpreted by some exegetes as referring to his nocturnal journey and ascension, while others explained that it was the same dream that foretold Muḥammad’s conquest of Mecca (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: V, 53–4).

The Qurʾān is also aware of false revelations which seem prophetic but come from Satan, which means that only a thin line separates genuine divine inspiration from Satanic temptation. This is demonstrated in the fact that the Qurʾān uses the same vocabulary for the Godly as well as the Satanic spheres. Thus satans (*shayāṭīn*), like God, can deliver *waḥy* (Q 6:112, 121), which is deceiving in its varnished outward appearance. But the more common verb denoting Satanic inspiration is *waswasa*, to “whisper” (e.g., Q 7:20; 20:120). Satan also casts (*alqā*) his own verses into genuine revelations received by every prophet, “but God annuls that which Satan casts” (Q 22:52). Moreover, the satans can be God’s messengers, but He sends (*yursilu*) them against the unbelievers (Q 19:83).

The distinction between a true prophet and other persons endowed with unique spiritual powers is also stated very clearly, in passages stressing that Muḥammad’s prophetic message is not the words of a *kāhīn* (“soothsayer”), neither of a poet nor a *majnūn*, that is, a madman possessed by demons (Q 52:29; 69:41–2; 81:22).

Imposters are severely denounced. Q 6:93 states: “And who is more unjust than he who forges a lie against God, or says: ‘It has been revealed (*ūḥiya*) to me’; while nothing has been revealed to him, and he who says: I can bring down (*sa-unzilu*) the like of what God has brought down (*anzala*)?” The exegetes say that this passage refers to persons like Musaylima and others who pretended to receive revelations similar to those of Muḥammad (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: III, 86).

Revealed Scriptures

The core of the prophetic revelation consists in revealed scriptures which are sometimes (e.g., Q 3:184) referred to as *zūbur* (singular *zabūr*), or *ṣuḥūf* (singular *ṣaḥīfa*). The latter term signifies “scrolls,” as, for example, in Q 87:19 in which the scrolls of Abraham and Moses are mentioned.

The most frequent name for a revealed scripture is *kitāb*, namely, something which has been written down, or simply a “book.” A *kitāb* is always of high solemnity. It may stand for the written list of deeds which determines the destiny of all people on the day of resurrection (e.g., Q 39:69), or the pre-existent divine Book in which the pre-ordained law of God has been recorded. This is, at least, how Muslim exegetes explain the locution “book of God” in Q 33:6 (also Q 30:56), which, so they hold, is identical with the “guarded tablet” (*lawḥ mahfūz*) mentioned in Q 85:22 (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VI, 354). The Qurʾān is said to have formed part of this tablet (Q 85:21), so that this revealed book is actually a reflection of a celestial text. Another locution which is taken to refer to the original celestial version of the universal book is *umm al-kitāb* mentioned in Q 43:4. Here it is stated that the Qurʾān is in the *umm al-kitāb* “with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom.” The exegetes maintain that it is another name for the tablet, the origin of all revealed books (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VII, 302).

The divine origin of the Qurʾānic revelation comes out in the idea that no one can alter God’s words as revealed to Muḥammad: “Recite what has been revealed to you of the book of your Lord; there is none who can alter His words...” (Q 18:27). God sent down the book to Muḥammad without any “crookedness” (Q 18:1), so that the revealed Qurʾān has remained faithful to the original message of the divine book. In other words, the book was sent down to Muḥammad “with the truth” (e.g., Q 39:2, etc.). It has also been sent down as a “blessed” (*mubārak*) book (e.g., Q 6:155; 38:29), and as a book “conformable” in its various parts (Q 39:23).

Not just the Qurʾān but any other revealed book is of the same divine origin, for which reason the Qurʾān recognizes the authenticity of previous revelations, saying that previous messengers, too, brought their peoples “clear arguments, scriptures, and the illuminating book” (Q 35:25, see also Q 3:184; 57:25).

Being an essential component of the prophetic message, the term *kitāb* often appears side by side with the term *nubuwwa* (“prophethood”), and both are perceived as components of a divine legacy that runs in a genealogical line of a chosen pedigree. Thus in Q 29:27, prophethood and the book are said to have remained in the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The same is said of the offspring of Noah and Abraham (Q 57:26). The book is therefore a divine legacy which God has bequeathed to whom he chose of his servants (Q 35:32).

Of the previous prophets, Moses in particular is mentioned as one whom God gave the book (Q 2:87). His book is described as “a light and a guidance to the people” (Q 6:91).

Apart from the term *kitāb*, previous scriptures are also mentioned by their individual titles, such as the Torah (*tawrāt*) of the Israelite prophets (Q 5:44), David’s *Zabūr* (Psalms) (Q 4:163; 17:55), and Jesus’ Gospel (*Injīl*). About the latter it is stated that it was full of guidance and light (Q 5:46).

Prophets and Messengers

Two major terms that describe the mission of the Qur'ānic prophets are *nabī*, “a prophet,” and *rasūl*, “a messenger.” As in the New Testament, in which messengers seem to rank higher than prophets (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:28–31; cf. Ephesians 3:5; 4:11), in the Qur'ān, too, *rasūl* seems to be somewhat more elevated than *nabī*. This is indicated, to begin with, in the fact that whenever both titles appear together, *rasūl* comes first, which may suggest that a messenger is more important than a prophet. Thus Q 22:52 describes Satan's attempts to lead astray any messenger (*rasūl*) or prophet (*nabī*) who was sent before Muḥammad. The Muslim commentators say that in this verse *rasūl* stands for a prophet having a message that must be delivered, whereas *nabī* has no such message. More specifically, al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685–716/1282–1316) says that *rasūl* is a prophet who establishes a new *sharī'a* (religious law), whereas *nabī* is he who continues an old one. This means, al-Bayḍāwī says, that *rasūl* is more distinguished than *nabī*, and therefore there were more *anbiyā'* (“prophets”) than *rusul* (“messengers”). Or, he adds, a *rasūl* receives his revelation from an angel, whereas a prophet experiences revelation only in dreams (al-Bayḍāwī 1988: II, 92–3 [on Q 22:52]).

The titles *rasūl* and *nabī* may also overlap and even refer to one and the same person, in which case *rasūl* again comes first. This applies to Moses, about whom it is stated in Q 19:51 that he was “a messenger, a prophet.” The same is stated about Ishmael (Q 19:54), as well as about Muḥammad (Q 7:157). The combination of the two in one person is perhaps designed to indicate that this person belongs to the messengers among the prophets.

But not every messenger of God is also a prophet. God is said to have made the angels “messengers flying on wings, two, and three, and four” (Q 35:1). As God's messengers, the angels bring good tidings to Abraham about the birth of Isaac and Jacob, and they also destroy the people of Lot (e.g., Q 11:69–81, etc.). God also sends angels to guard people as well as to receive their souls at the moment of death (Q 6:61, 7:37). Their primary role as God's messengers is to inspect and write down the deeds of every human being (Q 10:21; 43:80).

The Qur'ān is careful to draw a clear line between God's immortal and mortal messengers. Prophets can only be mortal, because angels, the Qur'ān says (Q 17:95), do not walk about on earth as ordinary dwellers, for which reason people cannot grasp their physical presence. Therefore, God does not send down angels to be His sent prophets.

Angels do, however, bring down prophetic revelations in their capacity as God's messengers, but they do not deliver them directly to the people, only to single human prophets. The Qur'ān mentions the “word” (*qawl*), i.e., prophetic message, of one particular “honored messenger” (Q 69:40; 81:19). Some exegetes have identified this messenger with the angel Gabriel whose mission was to reveal the Qur'ān to Muḥammad (Muqātil 1989: IV, 425). But Gabriel's task as God's messenger is not confined to prophetic revelations. He is also said to have been referred to in Q 19:19, in which God's messenger comes to Mary to give her a son (Jesus). Even the *rasūl* mentioned in the story of the golden calf (Q 20:96) was said to have been Gabriel (al-Qurṭubī 1967: XI, 239).

God started sending prophets after humankind became separated, when the initial state of righteousness was replaced by moral corruption. This is at least how some exegetes explain Q 2:213 in which it is stated: “The people were (united in) one nation, then (they became divided, and) God sent the prophets to bear good tidings and to warn” (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: I, 229).

Scope of the Prophetic Mission

In Q 33:7 God makes a special covenant (*mīthāq*) with the prophets: “And when We made a covenant with the prophets and with you [= Muḥammad], and with Noah and Abraham and Moses and Jesus son of Mary, and We made with them a firm covenant.” According to the commentators (e.g., al-Qurṭubī 1967: XIV, 127), the prophets undertook in this covenant to fulfill their mission faithfully.

The prophets are sent each to his own nation (*umma*) or people (*qawm*). This comes out in verses asserting that each nation has its own prophets sent to it (Q 10:47; 16:36), and that every messenger was only sent “with the language of his people” (Q 14:4). Thus Moses, for example, says to his people that he is God’s messenger to them (Q 61:5). Moreover, some prophets are described as the “brothers” of the peoples to whom they were sent (Q 26:106, 161, etc.). This is again an appropriate precedent for Muḥammad, the Arabian prophet who has brought to his nation an Arabic Qur’ān (e.g., Q 12:2). His Arabic Qur’ān was revealed to him that he may warn “the mother of cities” (*umm al-qurā*) (Q 42:7; see also Q 6:92), which is Mecca, according to the exegetes (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: VII, 273). But unlike the previous prophets, Muḥammad appears in some other passages as a universal prophet whose mission goes beyond ethnic boundaries. In Q 4:79 he is said to have been sent “to mankind as a messenger,” and in Q 21:107 he is sent with mercy “to the worlds.” His audience includes the *jinn* (Q 46:30), to whom messengers of their own kind were also sent (Q 6:130).

Aims of the Prophetic Mission

The purpose for which the Qur’ānic prophet has been sent is to make God’s religion, i.e., Islam, prevail over all religions (Q 9:33; 48:28; 61:9). This may involve waging war on the infidels, as is stated about the preceding prophets in Q 3:146: “And how many a prophet has fought, and with them were many worshipers of the Lord; so the (prophets) did not become weak-hearted on account of what befell them in God’s way, nor did they weaken, nor did they abase themselves; and God loves the patient.”

In other Qur’ānic passages, however, the religious campaign is based on preaching and is focused on the mere idea of monotheism and on the refutation of polytheism (*shirk*). Several times the previous prophets are described as imploring their respective peoples to “serve nothing but God” (e.g., Q 41:14). God also tells Muḥammad himself that this was the main mission of the prophets who were sent before him (Q 21:25, etc.),

and he himself says to his audience: "I am only a mortal like you; it is revealed to me that your God is one God, therefore follow the right way to Him and ask His forgiveness; and woe to the polytheists (*mushrikūn*)" (Q 41:6; see also Q18:110).

On the other hand, the mission of the prophets has also a grimmer aspect, namely, to warn stubborn unbelievers of their fate in hell, in case they do not repent. But the warning usually goes hand in hand with good tidings for those who believe (in paradise). Thus Q 6:48, for example, asserts that God's messengers were sent as "announcers of good news and givers of warning, then whoever believes and acts aright, they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve" (see also Q 4:165; 18:56, etc.). The same twofold message was entrusted with Muḥammad (Q 33:45, 48:8).

The messengers are responsible neither for the success nor for the failure of their message, and the Qur'ān repeatedly asserts that nothing is incumbent upon the messengers except a plain delivery (e.g., Q 16:35, etc.). Furthermore, the messengers are not even capable of changing the fate awaiting the unbelievers: "It is not (fit) for the prophet and those who believe that they should ask forgiveness for the polytheists, even though they should be near relatives, after it has become clear to them that they are inmates of the flaming fire" (Q 9:113; cf. Q 9:80, 84).

At the last judgment, believers and unbelievers will realize that the messengers had spoken the truth about their respective fate in paradise or hell (Q 7:43, 53; 36:52). The prophets themselves will be present on the scene of judgment and will act as witnesses as to who is righteous and who is a sinner (e.g., Q 4:41; 7:6; 16:84, 89). But according to Q 5:109, the messengers will not dare testify, and God Himself will know what the people were doing. But mercy is also a significant component of the prophetic message, and emanates mainly from the guidance that is inherent in the revealed book. This is stated in Q 16:89: "We have revealed the book to you explaining clearly everything, and a guidance and mercy and good news for those who are Muslims."

Being the ultimate source of guidance, some prophets are occasionally described as *imāms* who guide the people by God's command (Q 21:73), and their revealed book, too, is called "*imām* and mercy" (Q 11:17; 46:12). Guidance is achieved by the actual teaching of the book, and therefore Muḥammad is often described as a messenger teaching "the book and the wisdom" (Q 2:129, 151; 3:164, etc.).

A prophet is not only a spiritual guide but a judge too, whose adjudication is based on the revealed book. This was the case among the Jews for whom the prophets judged according to the revealed Torah (Q 5:44; 2:213), and the same is said about Muḥammad to whom God revealed the book "that you may judge between people by means of that which God has taught you" (Q 4:105).

Signs and Miracles

God not only provides His messengers with the prophetic inspiration but He also stays with them when they deliver His message. As is formulated in Q 72:27–8: "For surely He makes a guard to march before (His messenger) and after him, so that He may know that they have truly delivered the messages of their Lord." The "guards"

accompanying the prophets are said to be the angels, and elsewhere it is asserted that God is always aware of what His messengers are doing (Q 23:51). God's presence renders His messengers immune to dangers (Q 27:10), and His help is always ensured for them (Q 12:110; 40:51).

God also provides His prophets with concrete means designed to increase their power of persuasion. These are called *bayyināt*, that is, clear "proofs" or "arguments." Sometimes they are represented by miracles. For example, in Q 2:87 (see also Q 2:253), God provides Jesus with *bayyināt* and strengthens him with the Holy Spirit. The exegetes say that the latter stands for Gabriel, and that the *bayyināt* are the "proofs" which Jesus brought, such as are described in Q 3:49 (al-Qurṭubī 1967: II, 24). Here Jesus says to the Children of Israel: "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, that I create for you out of dust like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird with God's permission, and I heal the blind and the leprous, and bring the dead to life with God's permission, and I shall inform you of what you eat and what you have stored in your houses."

But miracles do not render the prophets divine, as is stressed especially with respect to Jesus. The Qur'ān insists that he is "only a messenger of God and His word which He cast unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. Believe therefore in God and His messengers, and say not: 'Three'" (Q 4:171).

Other prophets also brought such *bayyināt* to their own nations, alongside revealed scriptures, but they were rejected (Q 3:184; 35:25). Muḥammad, too, has brought (unspecified) *bayyināt* to his people, but they have discarded them as sheer magic (Q 61:6). The term *burhān* ("proof") is also used to signal what Muḥammad has brought to his audience (Q 4:174).

The listeners, however, not only reject the *bayyināt* but demand to receive a "sign" (*āya*) of their own choice (Q 2:118; 21:5, etc.). Often they request to see an angel being sent down with Muḥammad (Q 23:24, 25:7, etc.), or a treasure descending upon him (Q 11:12), or a fountain being made to gush forth from the earth for them (Q 17:90), and so forth. The Qur'ān responds to such demands by asserting that God's messengers can only produce signs with God's permission (Q 40:78), and that they are just mortals (Q 14:11). They may even have wives and children (Q 13:38). Elsewhere it is stressed that they are merely humans receiving revelation (e.g., Q 12:109; 16:43, etc.), and that they eat food and go about in the markets (Q 25:20).

But God may at times send a sign in response to a specific request. This was the case with the prophet Ṣāliḥ who was sent as warner to Thamūd. They asked him for a sign, and he produced a she-camel. They were ordered to share their water with her on appointed intervals (Q 26:154–5), or, according to another version (Q 11:64), to leave her to pasture on God's earth and not harm her. But Thamūd killed the she-camel (Q 11:65), for which reason God no longer sends signs on demand (Q 17:59).

Nevertheless, Moses too brought a sign in response to the demand of the Pharaoh (Q 7:106; 26:31). The sign was that the rod of Moses was turned into a serpent, and his hand became "white to the beholders." The audience denied the double sign as evident magic (Q 7:107–9; 26:31–4). But these two signs were given to Moses in advance, upon

his first encounter with God (Q 20:17–23; 27:10–12; 28:31–2). They formed part of nine (not ten, as in the Old Testament) signs which God gave to Moses, and they are therefore not just *āyāt* but rather *āyāt bayyināt* (Q 17:101; 28:36), as well as *burhān* (“proof”) (Q 28:32). Elsewhere a list of all the signs, i.e., the calamities, is provided (Q 7:130–5).

Reception of the Prophets

The nations to whom prophets have been sent are expected to receive them with consent and obedience. As Q 4:64 puts it: “And We did not send any messenger but that he should be obeyed by God’s permission.” But the prophets were received with anything but obedience. They were mocked (Q 15:11, etc.) and called liars (e.g., Q 3:184; 22:42; 23:44; 35:25, etc.), and their message was denied (Q 11:59) and denounced as “medleys of dreams” (Q 21:5). The prophets were rejected mainly on account of their being ordinary human beings (e.g., Q 14:10; 17:94; 36:15; 64:6), and were accused of being mere poets, magicians (*sāḥir*), and madmen (*majnūn*) (e.g., Q 21:5; 51:52). Some of them were received with provocative demands (Q 2:108), and above all, their audience expressed devotion to the pagan tradition of the ancestors (Q 43:23).

The prophets have also suffered actual persecution, such as the threat of expulsion (e.g., Q 14:13), and also death at the hand of their own peoples, as was the fate of the Israelite prophets (e.g., Q 2:61, 87, 91, etc.). The sufferings of the previous prophets are recounted to comfort Muḥammad in his own distress, which resembles that of his precursors. As stated in Q 41:43: “Nothing is said to you but what was said indeed to the messengers before you.” Not only humankind but also the satans rose as enemies to the prophets. In Q 6:112, God says: “And thus did We make for every prophet an enemy, the satans from among humans and *jinn*...” Satan’s enmity is seen in that he makes rebellion look attractive to nations to whom messengers were sent (Q 16:63).

Rejection is met with retribution. Time and again the Qur’ān describes how nations that disobeyed their prophets were punished by severe calamities. Such calamities are described mainly in what is known in modern scholarship as “the punishment stories.” They contain the stories of the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Shu‘ayb, Loth, and others. Rejection of messengers renders retribution inevitable, as stated in Q 7:94: “And We did not send a prophet in a town but We overtook its people with distress and affliction in order that they might humble themselves.” The divine logic that comes out here is that God is enemy to anyone who is “the enemy of God and His angels and His messengers and Gabriel and Michael” (Q 2:98). Retribution is the direct result of the fact that God has promised to protect the prophets (Q 14:47), and it is defined as God’s *sunna* with respect to those who persecute the prophets (Q 17:76–7; 33:38–9). Destruction is never arbitrary or unjust, and is only inflicted on towns that have been warned in advance by their prophets (Q 17:15; 28:59). The prophets and their close entourage are always saved from the collective disaster (Q 10:103, etc.).

Polemics

The main axis around which the Qur'ānic allusions to the prophets revolves is anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemics. The Qur'ān claims to have exclusive right to interpret the religious and moral legacy of the biblical prophets, and accuses the Jews and the Christians of a deliberate distortion of that legacy. The legacy of the prophets, according to the Qur'ān, is clearly an Islamic one. Each and every prophet was a Muslim, as stated for example in Q 5:44, which says that the Torah was revealed to the prophets "who were Muslims." Likewise, the religion that was enjoined upon the prophets was the same as the one given to the Muslims, a fact stated in Q 42:13: "He has enjoined upon you (*shara'a*) for religion what He prescribed to Noah and that which We have revealed to you and that which We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus." Therefore, true Muslims are only those who believe in all the prophets with no exception (Q 2:136, 177, 285, etc.).

In fact, the prophets formed a "nation" of their own, as stated in Q 2:134, 141. These verses address the Jews and the Christians, saying that these communities shall be judged on their own account, just as the prophets shall be judged on their own account. In other words, the prophets were neither Jews nor Christians (Q 2:140).

The religious and moral exclusion of the Jews and the Christians from the legacy of the prophets comes out most clearly in passages dealing with Abraham. The Qur'ān denies the Jews and the Christians any right to argue with the Muslims about his religion, insisting that Abraham had lived long before the revelation of the Torah and the Gospels, and that he had been neither a Jew, nor a Christian (Q 3:65–7). This means that the Muslims are no less entitled to his legacy than the Jews and the Christians, and in fact Muḥammad's followers, more than anyone else, preserve Abraham's genuine legacy (Q 3:68).

Apart from the "Islamization" of the biblical prophets, the Qur'ān also defends Muḥammad's own position as God's prophet. The Qur'ān declares that Muḥammad is "one of the messengers" (Q 2:252), and that he is the "seal of the prophets" (Q 33:40). Moreover, the previous prophets are said to have been commanded by God in a solemn covenant to believe in Muḥammad. In Q 3:81 we read: "And when God made a covenant with the prophets: Surely, the book and the wisdom that I have given you – then a messenger comes to you verifying that which is with you, you must believe in him, and you must aid him. (God) said: 'Do you affirm and accept My compact in this (matter)?' The (prophets) said: 'We do affirm.' (God) said: 'Then bear witness, and I (too) am of the bearers of witness with you.'" The exegetes explain that the messenger in whom the prophets are demanded to believe is Muḥammad (e.g., al-Qurṭubī 1967: IV, 125).

The prophets were not only requested to believe in Muḥammad, but some of them were familiar with his titles, which were included in their own revealed scriptures. Thus in Q 7:157 it is stated that Muḥammad was mentioned as a "Gentile" (*ummī*) in the Torah and the Gospel. Jesus, it is said in Q 61:6, announced the appearance of a messenger who will come after him, his name being Aḥmad. The allusions to Muḥammad in the scriptures are verified in the Qur'ān. For example, Q 2:41 addresses the Children of Israel, requesting of them to believe "in what I have revealed, verifying that which is

with you.” The exegetes say that this verse requests of the Jews to believe in the Qurʾān, which concurs with Muḥammad’s descriptions that are found in the Torah and the Gospels (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984: I, 73).

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CHAPTER 16

Moses

Brannon Wheeler

The significance of Moses in the Qurʾān, especially as Muslim exegesis understands his relationship to the prophet Muḥammad as the ideal prophet-conqueror, can hardly be underestimated. In Q 19:51 Moses is described as “pure, a messenger, a prophet.” Elsewhere, God speaks directly to Moses (Q 4:164), and Moses sees God in the crashing of a mountain (Q 7:143). To Moses is revealed the “book” (*kitāb*), the “*furqān*” (Q 2:53), the “tablets” (*alwāḥ*) (Q 7:150–4), the “Torah,” and the “first scriptures” (*al-ṣuḥuf al-ūlā*) (Q 87:18–19). Moses is given his brother Aaron as a prophet (Q 19:53) and meets with a mysterious servant of God (Q 18:60–82), later identified as the prophet Khidr.

Unlike the short segments of stories and odd episodes scattered in different *sūras* associated with many of the other prophetic figures in the Qurʾān, relatively long and connected narratives featuring Moses are to be found throughout the Qurʾān. Of all the prophets mentioned by name in the Qurʾān, Moses is by far the most frequent, his name occurring 137 times compared with sixty-nine occurrences of Abraham, forty-three of Noah, and twenty-five of Jesus. Most of the passages in the Qurʾān featuring Moses fall into two general categories: Moses in Egypt, and Moses with the Israelites. Close parallels to all of these passages can be found in the Bible and in Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions. It is important to keep in mind that Muslim exegetes are not only aware of these biblical parallels, but purposefully draw attention to them in their own interpretation of the Qurʾān narrative. Muslim exegesis uses a wide variety of non-Qurʾānic and non-Arabic sources in demonstrating the significance of Moses to the origins and authority of the mission of the prophet Muḥammad.

Moses in Egypt

The narrative describing the life of Moses in Egypt and his relationship to the Israelites enslaved there is found in a number of passages in the Qur'ān which may be subdivided into episodes: birth and childhood of Moses, flight to Midian, revelation, Moses and Pharaoh, and exodus from Egypt.

Birth and childhood of Moses

According to Muslim exegetes,¹ Moses was the son of Imran, a Levite descendant of Jacob, also known as Israel. Q 28:1–6 describes how the Israelites were enslaved by the Pharaoh and Haman. Muslim exegesis adds that the Pharaoh ordered the killing of all Israelite males because his advisers, on information obtained from Abraham's earlier visit to Egypt, told him of a boy who would cause the destruction of his state. Echoing a motif also found in Jewish exegesis, some Muslim exegetes mention that the Egyptians only killed the male Israelite babies every other year so that they would not extinguish their working force. This also helps to explain the existence of Moses' brother Aaron later in the narrative.

Q 20:38–41 and 28:7–13 narrate how God caused Moses to be adopted into the house of Pharaoh by being cast into the sea, later rescued by the wife of Pharaoh, and ultimately nursed by his own mother. The exegesis of these verses makes clear that the Pharaoh and his wife knew Moses was an Israelite, and perhaps the very child against which they were attempting to protect themselves. This awareness of the part of Pharaoh and his wife builds an additional dramatic tension into the story, making the Pharaoh unable to defend against his own actions in raising the child who would eventually lead to his ruin. The early authority Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687) states that the wife of Pharaoh was named Āsiya, and that she asked the mother of Moses to live with her, but she declined. The exegete al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) reports that some claim that Āsiya was an Israelite and worshiped God in secret despite being married to the Pharaoh.

Flight to Midian

According to the exegesis of Q 28:14, Moses was given prophethood when he reached maturity, and Q 28:15–21 describes how he killed a man, blamed it on Satan, and then fled to Midian. Al-Tha'labī explains that the man who warned Moses about the Pharaoh plotting to kill him for the murder was Ḥizqīl, the Egyptian who is later credited with being one of only a couple of people from among the Egyptians who believed in Moses (Q 40:28).

Q 28:20–8 describes the flight of Moses to Midian, his saving of two daughters at a well, a vow he made with God, and his agreement to work for a number of years for his future father-in-law. Muslim exegesis casts the entire episode in terms paralleling the

flight of Jacob to Laban as described in Genesis 28–32, emphasizing common elements such as the well, the vow, working for the marriage of the daughters, and the episode of the speckled sheep.

Revelation

Upon leaving Midian, Moses receives his commission from God, as recorded in Q 20:9–24, 27:7–12, 28:29–35, and 79:15–19. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) explains that it was during a cold and rainy night that Moses spotted a tree burning in the distance. When he approached the place he received instructions from God about prophesying before the Pharaoh. According to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), the tree Moses found was a boxthorn surrounded by other boxthorns and olive trees, relating the location to contemporary Jewish and Christian exegesis on the burning bush in Exodus.

Al-Thaʿlabī reports that God told Moses to remove his shoes because his feet were touching ground made twice holy. The authority Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. ca. 95/712) relates the instructions for Moses to remove his shoes with the prohibition against wearing shoes in the Kaʿba in Mecca, thereby comparing the two locations. The naming of the place as the “valley of Ṭuwā” (Q 20:12; 79:16) is also understood by some Muslim exegetes as a reference to a valley near Mecca where the prophet Muḥammad received revelations.

In Q 20:14 God states to Moses: “I am God. There is no God other than I. Worship me and establish prayer to remember me.” Q 27:9 has God state: “Moses, I am God, the Mighty, the Wise.” And in Q 28:30, God says: “Moses, I am God, Lord of the worlds.” These expressions are understood as God’s pronouncement of Himself to Moses, and may parallel the announcement of God’s name in Exodus 3:14.

God gives two signs to Moses. In Q 20:17–22, 27:10, and 28:31 Moses throws down his rod, which moves as if it were a snake. In Q 20:22, 27:12, and 28:32, God commands Moses to put his hand in and out of his clothes, finding his hand white but unharmed, perhaps a reference to leprosy. Q 27:12 also states that Moses’ white hand is among the “nine signs” to Pharaoh and his people, and Q 28:32 describes the rod and the hand as “two proofs” from God to Pharaoh. In Q 28:33–5 Moses responds that he is afraid because of the person he killed, and describes his brother Aaron as “more eloquent in tongue,” asking God to send Aaron with him as a helper.

Moses and Pharaoh

The confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is narrated in a number of different places, each with slightly different details. Q 7:103–26 contains an account of the contest between Moses and Aaron and the Pharaoh’s magicians. In Q 7:120–6 and 26:46–51, the defeated magicians profess belief in the God of Moses and Aaron though the Pharaoh threatens to crucify them all for believing without his permission. Q 10:83 states that after the contest only a “few” people believed because of their fear of Pharaoh.

Q 17:101–3, 20:49–63, and 26:10–29 recount dialogues between Moses and Pharaoh. In each of these Moses represents the God of the Israelites against Pharaoh, who claims that he himself is God. Among the arguments Moses uses with Pharaoh are that God created the earth and placed Pharaoh in it with authority. In Q 26:17–19 Moses demands that Pharaoh free the Israelites, but Pharaoh counters by accusing Moses of having lived under his protection for many years, and having killed a man.

In Q 26:16 Moses says he is sent by the “Lord of the worlds,” an epithet of God, which is further specified in verse 24 as “Lord of the heavens and the earth and what is between them” and in verse 28 as “Lord of the east, the west, and what is between them.” Q 79:20 refers to “the great sign” Moses shows Pharaoh which was rejected. Q 7:127–36 describes a number of afflictions visited upon the Pharaoh and his people, including flood, locusts, pestilence, frogs, and blood. According to Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. ca. 104/722), the locusts ate the nails from the doors of the Egyptians and the insides of the wood. Saʿīd b. Jubayr says the pestilence was worms which ruined all the dry stores of grain. Muḥammad’s biographer Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) reports that Moses caused the pestilence to come out of a great mound of sand by hitting it with his rod.

In Q 79:24, Pharaoh proclaims, “I am your Lord, most high.” Muslim exegetes understand this proclamation as an epitome not only of Pharaoh’s disobedience, but of all human refusal to acknowledge God. Rejecting God is equivalent to claiming to be God. Q 28:36–42 describes how Pharaoh ordered Haman to build a tower out of baked brick so he could prove there was no god other than himself, perhaps recalling the Tower of Babel from Genesis. Saʿīd b. Jubayr says it took seven years and 50,000 people to build the tower, and that God made it easy for Pharaoh so that his arrogance would be even more evident. According to al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105/723 or 106/724), when the tower was destroyed by the archangel Gabriel the pieces were flung as far as India.

Al-Thaʿlabī explains that God filled the house of Pharaoh with kingship, authority, wealth, and pleasure, and gave him a kingdom so great that his people worshiped him. He was given a long life, great strength, and a powerful army. Pharaoh could go for forty days with no food and water, never got sick, and did not need sleep. Saʿīd b. Jubayr mentions that Pharaoh had a certain castle with thousands of stairs for which God provided a special animal to transport Pharaoh up and down from the castle. These blessings were given to him to stress how great his sin was in rejecting God.

Egyptian who believed

Q 40:23–46 describes the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, Haman, and Korah. Moses is given a long dialogue in which he refers to past prophets such as Noah, and the people of ʿĀd and Thamūd. Moses also refers to Joseph, and again Pharaoh orders Haman to build a tower like the Tower of Babel. During the exchange, one of the Egyptians speaks up in support of Moses. Verse 38 simply refers to the speaker as “the one who believed,” though he is identified by Muslim exegesis as the son of Pharaoh’s paternal uncle or a secret Israelite. Al-Thaʿlabī states that his name was Ḥizqīl, that he was one of the carpenters of Pharaoh, and that he was the one who had made the ark

into which Moses had been placed and put into the sea after his birth. Ibn ‘Abbās states that the wife of Pharaoh also believed in Moses.

Exodus

Q 26:52–68 and 44:17–33 describe the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. In Q 26:63–6 God commands Moses to strike the sea with his rod, causing it to divide and saving the Israelites while drowning the pursuing Egyptians. Q 44:24 mentions God’s command to Moses to return the sea to its calm in order to drown the Egyptian army. Ibn Kathīr records an account in which Gabriel appears and drags Pharaoh into the sea.

Several passages describe the punishment of Pharaoh and his people, including Q 10:90–2 in which Pharaoh attempts to repent and proclaim that he believes in God. Ibn ‘Abbās relates that Muḥammad heard Gabriel say that he took a wall of the sea and shoved it into the mouth of Pharaoh so that he could not repent. God also ordered the sea to exhume the body of Pharaoh so that the Israelites would know that he had perished.

The traditionist al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) preserves a *ḥadīth* report in which Muḥammad asks the Jews of Medina why they fasted on the tenth day of Muḥarram. The Jews of Medina replied that it was the day Moses was victorious over the Pharaoh. In the *ḥadīth* report, Muḥammad agrees and orders his followers also to fast on this day.

Moses and the Israelites

Muslim exegetes emphasize the parallels between many of the themes and motifs associated with Moses and to the Israelites in the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān does not provide a single coherent narrative of the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness but recounts key episodes from that time, most of which are closely related to the narratives found in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Wilderness of wandering

Q 2:47–61 outlines a number of incidents and blessings related to the Israelites in Egypt and after their exodus. Muslim exegetes do not agree, however, on the chronology of the events mentioned. In each case, the blessing or gift given to the Israelites is followed by a statement concerning the disobedience of the Israelites, in particular their lack of thankfulness for God’s generosity. The passage begins in verse 48 with a warning of the day when the Israelites will be punished for their sins, a day when no one, including Moses, will be allowed to intercede on their behalf. The passage ends with the claim that the Israelites rejected the signs of God and killed his prophets without cause, rebelled, and transgressed against God’s commands.

Q 2:51–6 refers to the forty nights Moses left the Israelites in the wilderness when he was given the “book” and the *furqān* while the Israelites worshiped the golden calf. Q 2:57 refers to God’s gifts of the cloud, the manna, and the quail. Q 2:58 includes God’s command that the Israelites enter a particular city, entering by a gate saying “*Hitta*,” and in verse 59 the Israelites are said to have changed the wording of what God required and were thus punished by a plague from God. Q 2:60 refers to Moses striking the rock and producing twelve springs of water for the Israelites. In Q 2:61 the Israelites complain about not having pot-herbs, cucumbers, garlic, lentils, and onions. Moses offers the option of returning to Egypt, but the Israelites recognize their sin of complaint and ungratefulness.

According to Muslim exegesis, among the other blessings given to the Israelites throughout their history were kings, prophets, and books. Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Balkhī (d. 319/931) states that it was the Israelites in the wilderness whom God made like kings, providing them all the luxuries they could want: clouds to shade them by day, fire to light their way by night, bread and meat from heaven, and water from rocks. According to al-Suddī (d. 128/745) the Israelites’ clothes also grew on their bodies from the time they were born so that they had no need for producing or replacing them. Some authorities compare the manna with honey and the quail with special birds that lived only in the garden of Eden.

Moses on the mountain

Q 7:142–7 describes Moses’ sojourn of forty days and nights on the mountain to receive the Torah. It was during this time that Moses requested to see God, and God revealed himself to the mountain which then crashed down to the ground, causing Moses to faint. According to Ibn ‘Abbās, no one was able to look at the face of Moses after this so he wore a piece of silk over his face.

Golden calf

Q 7:148–58 and 20:80–98 depict the Israelites’ worship of the golden calf during the absence of Moses. In Q 20:85 and 87 someone named the “Sāmīrī,” perhaps a reference to the perceived division between the Jews and Samaritans, is held responsible for the golden calf, though in Q 7:150 and 20:93 it is Aaron whom Moses drags by the hair and accuses of having instigated the sin. In Q 20:96, the Sāmīrī claims to have thrown a “handful from the footprint of the messenger,” which Muslim exegetes claim was dirt from the ground where the horse of Gabriel alighted. According to Ibn ‘Abbās, the Sāmīrī was a man from the people of Bajarma, from a people who worshiped cows. It was the love for the worship of cows that made him cause the Israelites to worship the golden calf.

Muslim exegetes state that God punished the Israelites by commanding them to kill themselves. Ibn ‘Abbās describes a scene where certain Israelites innocent of the sin of

worshiping the golden calf were given daggers to kill the guilty in a supernatural darkness that resulted in the death of 70,000 Israelites. According to Ibn Ishāq, God struck dead a group of Israelites with thunder, then raised them back to life so they could watch another group be struck dead with thunder. In another tradition, the Israelites are forced to drink from the sea into which Moses had filed down and flung the remains of the golden calf.

In Q 7:150, out of anger for the worship of the golden calf, Moses throws the tablets, and one reading of verse 154 refers to the guidance and mercy that was abrogated from the tablets at this time. Ibn ʿAbbās states that when Moses threw down the tablets, God recalled six of the seven parts and left only one seventh for the Israelites. Early Christian exegesis of Exodus likewise argues that God imposed the Torah upon the Israelites as a curse and punishment for their worship of the golden calf.

Seventy chosen

Some exegetes preserve traditions regarding a special group of Israelites whom Moses chose to go with him to the mountain. According to Ibn Ishāq, it was this seventy chosen Israelites who asked to see God (Q 2:55) when he went up onto the mountain, and whom God struck dead with thunder and raised back to life again. Al-Suddī reports that Moses was upset at the death of the seventy chosen because he claimed that if God felt the best of the Israelites should be destroyed, what of the others back at the camp who were not chosen?

ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Zayd b. Aslam (d. 182/799) reports that the seventy chosen were punished by God because they refused to believe what Moses told them without being able to see God themselves. After killing the seventy with thunder and resurrecting them, God asked them again to accept his revealed book. When the seventy again refused, God sent an angel to lift Mt. Sinai over their heads until they repented, which they eventually did.

Water from the rock

According to Muslim exegesis, the water from the rock described in Q 7:160 came from a special square rock which the Israelites used to carry around with them during their wanderings. ʿAṭīyya al-ʿAwfī (d. 111/729) states that this rock was given to the Israelites by God and was carried around on a bull. ʿUthmān b. ʿAṭāʾ al-Khurasānī (d. second/eighth century) reports that Aaron would hold the rock while Moses would strike it with his rod. Qatāda (d. 118/736) says that it was a piece of Mt. Sinai. Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) states that the rock was about the size of a person's head, and that it came from the garden of Eden. The rock is said to have originally descended to earth in the time of Adam along with the rod which belonged to Moses, and both the rod and the rock were passed down through the prophets until Shuʿayb gave them to Moses.

Entering the promised land

Q 5:20–5 recounts God’s command that the Israelites enter the “holy land” which he had promised to them. In verse 22, the people protest to Moses that the land is full of giants, and in verse 24 they refuse to enter. In verse 25, Moses renounces responsibility for the Israelites and asks God to separate him and his brother Aaron from the sinners. In verse 26, God curses the Israelites with forty years of wandering because of their refusal to enter the land.

Muslim exegetes preserve different reports regarding the meaning of the term “holy land” as it is used in this passage. According to some, it refers only to Jerusalem. Others claim that the “holy land” includes Damascus, Palestine, and part of Jordan. Mujāhid states that the “holy land” is Mt. Sinai and the land which surrounds it.

Al-Ṭabrisī (d. ca. 548/1153) includes a long account of how the Israelites sent representatives from each of their twelve tribes into the land, including Joshua b. Nūn and Caleb. He also reports that there is disagreement among exegetes concerning who was responsible for conquering the land. Some traditions hold that it was Moses himself who conquered the land, being responsible for slaying the leading giant of the people there named Og b. ‘Anaq who had survived since before the time of Noah’s flood. Others report that it was Joshua who conquered the land, at one time calling upon God to keep the sun up in the sky until the Israelites took the city of Jericho.

Sin of Israelites and Moses

Moses’ request to God that he separate him and his brother from the sinful Israelites in Q 5:25 is understood by Muslim exegetes as his refusal to intercede on behalf of his people. Al-Ṭabrisī says that the request was equivalent to Moses asking God to take him and his brother to Heaven while the Israelites were damned to Hell. According to al-Zajjāj (d. ca. 337/949), Moses and Aaron enjoyed special privileges in the wilderness so that they suffered little while the Israelites were punished for forty years.

People of Moses

Another tradition related to Moses and the Israelites and highlighted by Muslim exegesis is the reference to the “people of Moses” (*awlād Mūsā*) in Q 7:159. According to this verse, the “people of Moses” were a group of Israelites who were guided by the truth and acted justly. Numerous exegetical traditions refer to this group of people who are said to have been taken by God to the ends of the earth where they are later visited by different kings and prophets, including Alexander the Great and Muḥammad.

The historian Yāqūt (d. 626/1229) explains that the people of Moses live in the city of Jabars at the eastern extreme of the world. Ibn ‘Abbās claims that the people of Moses live in Jabars and in the city of Jabalq, a city at the western extreme of the world. Al-Qurtubī (d. 671/1272) preserves a tradition that the people of Moses live in a land

beyond China, on the other side of a river of flowing sand. God is said to have taken them to the edge of the earth by way of a subterranean passage in which they walked for over a year. According to Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767), the people of Moses were righteous Israelites who were removed from the sinful Israelites when they were killing their prophets and disbelieving. Others report that the people of Moses live in a city beyond Spain, in the extreme west, surrounded by mountains of gold and silver.

Sacrifice of the red cow

Q 2:67–73 describes what appears to be an isolated episode from Israelite history. In verse 67, Moses relates that God commands the Israelites to sacrifice a cow. The Israelites do not obey but instead keep asking God for further specifications, such as the age, color, and type of cow to be sacrificed. Verse 71 states that the Israelites “almost did not” do the sacrifice because the cow thus described was so difficult to find.

Muslim exegetes argue that this episode epitomizes the sinfulness of the Israelites. Instead of following God’s instructions, the Israelites attempted to circumvent their obligation by making the command impossible to do. With each question posed by the Israelites, though, God imposed upon them a more difficult task. What began as a simple sacrifice became the sacrifice of a specially raised red cow with no blemishes, almost unique. Other exegetes relate this account to a special ritual designed to determine the culprit in the murder of an unclaimed corpse, perhaps related to the ritual mentioned in Numbers 19:17–22.

City by the sea

Closely related to the red cow sacrifice is the story of the city by the sea found in Q 7:163–6. This short passage describes a city in which the people are not allowed to fish on the Sabbath. According to Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/796), the fish in the sea used to come out only on the Sabbath, so after some time one person in the city devised a method for snaring the fish on the Sabbath and then removing and eating the fish on another day. In this way, the people tried to circumvent the prohibition of the Sabbath. Q 7:165 states, however, that God punished the people who violated the law, and verse 166 refers to God’s turning them into apes. Q 2:65 also refers to those who transgressed the Sabbath being turned into apes, and Q 5:78 refers to the Israelites cursed by David and Jesus, turned into apes and pigs.

Muslim exegetes tend to identify the city mentioned in Q 7:163–6 as Eilat or another city somewhere between Eilat and Mt. Sinai. According to Qatāda, some of the people were changed into apes and some into pigs, and that is why the Israelites broke into two sects. Ibn ‘Abbās explains that it was the Israelites themselves who made the Sabbath holy, against the wishes of Moses, but because of this, God imposed upon them the obligation of keeping the Sabbath, which included a prohibition on fishing. Al-Bukhārī records a report which states that ‘Amr b. Maymūn once saw a group of primates stoning other primates who had fornicated, so he joined in the administration of the punishment.

Mythology and Intertextuality of the Islamic Moses

Given the frequency of references to Moses in the text of the Qurʾān, the importance of his character, and his historical role in the leadership of the Israelites, it is not surprising that Muslim exegetes devote so much to the development of an elaborate typology of Moses in relationship to Muḥammad. Muslim scholars rely upon non-Qurʾānic sources to craft an exegetical picture of Moses that contrasts in important ways with the model prophethood of Muḥammad. In adapting this picture, Muslim exegetes draw upon but also distinguish their own views of Moses from contemporaneous Jewish and Christian views largely based on a reading of the Bible.

Two of the most telling examples of this exegetical picture can be found in the Muslim exegesis of Q 28:22–8 and Q 18:60–82. The first is the episode of Midian, which takes place just shortly after Moses reaches maturity and is granted prophethood. The second is the encounter between Moses and the mysterious servant of God, identified by Muslim exegetes as the immortal prophet Khidr. In both episodes, the Muslim exegetical picture shares many details with the biblical image of Moses but is distinct in its focus upon a prophet who failed to attribute his knowledge to God and intercede on behalf of his people.

Moses and Jacob

Q 28:22–8 describes Moses' flight to and residence in Midian, and these verses form the basis for a number of rich mythological associations between Moses and other prophetic figures. Muslim exegesis casts the entire episode in terms familiar from the story of Isaac found in Genesis 28:10–31:21. According to a *ḥadīth* report given on the authority of the second caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, when Moses arrived at the well of Midian he moved from its mouth a rock which could only be moved by ten men. Al-Zamakhsharī reports that the rock moved by Moses alone could only be moved by a hundred men. This parallels Jacob's feat of moving the rock from the well in Genesis 29:1–14 with the exception that Jacob's "rolling" of the rock is replaced by the more fantastic "lifting" of the rock by Moses. Jewish exegesis, such as that found in the Hellenistic Jewish sources like Philo, and medieval rabbinic sources such as the *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* and the *Midrash Rabba* on Exodus 2:17, also report that Moses performed a miraculous or heroic feat at the well of Midian.

Oaths

An important element from the Jacob story linked to Moses in Midian is the oath made between God and Jacob in Genesis 28:20–1. Q 28:24 mentions that Moses asks God for something, a request which is interpreted by Muslim exegesis as Moses asking for protection from his enemies. This parallels the situation of Jacob who, having left the protection of his father, enters into the protection of God in Genesis 28. Jacob

promised that Yahweh would be his God upon his safe return to his father's house. This also parallels the oath Jacob later makes with Laban for marriage to his daughters and, after that, for receiving the speckled sheep. Moses also makes an oath with God in Q 28:24 that parallels the agreement with his future father-in-law in Q 28:27–8. Just as the oath between Jacob and God results in Jacob's return from Laban with wives, sons, sheep, and becoming Israel the father of the twelve tribes, so the oath between God and Moses foreshadows Moses' commission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Some Muslim exegetes also relate this oath with Moses' reception of revelation at the mountain in Q 20:10–33.

Two daughters

Muslim exegetes also link the Midian episode with Jacob by the names given to the two daughters Moses meets in Midian: Zipporah and Leah. The exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) gives these two names, along with providing a close translation of Exodus 2:16. Zipporah is reported to be the wife of Moses in Exodus 2:21, and Leah is the name of the wife that Jacob marries first in Genesis 29:15–30, although he had intended to marry Rachel. Some Muslim exegetes claim that Moses married Leah along with Zipporah just as Jacob married both the daughters of Laban.

Speckled sheep

Muslim exegesis associates the account of the speckled sheep from the story of Jacob in Genesis with Moses and his stay in Midian. In a close parallel to Genesis 30:25–43, al-Zamakhsharī states that Moses' father-in-law agreed to give to him all the sheep born speckled in a given year, and God instructed Moses to hit each sheep with his rod at the water trough so that all of the sheep that year were born speckled. In Genesis 30, God instructs Jacob to take rods from different trees and place them in front of the water trough of the sheep while they are in heat to produce the speckled offspring.

God's attack upon Moses and Jacob

Moses and Jacob are also compared in their similar episodes of fighting with God. Al-Zamakhsharī records an account of Moses fighting with a supernatural being when he leaves Midian and being saved only by the miraculous actions of his rod. Exodus 4:24–6 also contains an account of God attacking Moses when taking leave from his father-in-law, and Moses is saved by Zipporah who cuts the foreskin of her son and rubs it on the genitals of Moses. The rod of Moses, rich in its symbolic representation of Moses' own fertility, especially when associated with the story of Jacob's rods and the speckled sheep, is in the account of al-Zamakhsharī found bloody upon defeat of the supernatural being, perhaps suggesting the circumcision of Moses.

This interpretation is explicitly linked to God's attack upon Jacob in Genesis 32:23–32 and the Muslim exegesis of Q 3:93. In Genesis 32 Jacob is said to come upon a pass where he is attacked by a supernatural being later identified as God, and is wounded in the hollow of his thigh, also understood to be his genitals, just as Moses was attacked while moving his sheep in the account of al-Zamakhsharī. Indeed, the same term, *kaff*, is used in both the Hebrew and Arabic to designate the location of the danger to Moses and Jacob. Jewish exegetes also stress the relationship between the attack on Moses and Jacob and the rite of circumcision which was representative of the oath made with God.

In the Muslim exegesis of Q 3:93 there are accounts which report that Jacob fought with God because he had not fulfilled the earlier oath he had made with God to sacrifice the last of his sons. In Genesis 28:20–2, Jacob does vow to give God a tithe of everything God gives to him if he returns safely to his father, though there is no indication of any tithe of the livestock and sons that Jacob acquires in the course of Genesis 29–32. Rabbinic exegesis in the *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and the *Targum Yerushalmi* also appears to interpret the attack upon Jacob as being due to his not fulfilling his vow to make a tithe to God of his livestock and sons. The *Midrash Tanhuma* and the *Midrash Rabba* on Genesis 32:21 both stress that Jacob refers to his brother Esau as “lord” and gives to him the tithe he should have been giving to God though Jacob had promised to call Yahweh his “Lord” in Genesis 28:20–2.

It is not likely that Muslim exegesis draws upon this parallel to put Moses in the role of redeeming his son, who is not mentioned by name in the Qurʾān or Muslim exegesis. In Exodus 4:24–6 and in al-Zamakhsharī's account of the rod defeating the supernatural being, Moses has no part in his own salvation. In addition, it is the Israelites, the people of Moses, rather than his own sons, with whom Moses is most closely associated by Muslim exegetes. The conflation of Moses and Jacob emphasizes Moses' symbolic association with Jacob/Israel, and the Israelites as his sons. What happens to the Israelites in the wilderness also parallels what happens to Moses in Egypt. Muslim exegetes indicate how the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Mt. Sinai and God's attacks upon them parallel the events of Moses and his flight from Egypt to Midian.

Jethro and Shuʿayb

Perhaps even more significant for the Muslim exegesis of the Midian episode is the identification of Moses' father-in-law as the Arab prophet Shuʿayb (see Q 7:85–93; 11:84–95; 29:36–7). Although a number of Muslim exegetes point out the historical problems associated with such an identification (see Q 11:89), several reasons are given in its support. One of these is the tradition that Moses' father-in-law was the “priest” of Midian, not found in Q 28:21–8 but in Exodus 2:16. Rabbinic tradition goes to great lengths to explain how a non-Israelite could be designated with the title “kohen” normally reserved only for priests of Yahweh. This is further complicated by the fact that the name “Jethro” does not occur in Exodus 2:15–21, and that Moses' father-in-law is also referred to as Reuel and Hobab in other contexts, though Muslim exegetes also know the name of Jethro (Yatrūn or Thayrūn). A report from Muḥammad explicitly states the identity of Jethro and Shuʿayb.

Some Muslim exegetes appear to make this identification linked to the close association between the prophet Shu‘ayb and the prophet Khiḍr whom Moses is said to meet according to the exegesis of Q 18:60–82. Khiḍr challenges Moses’ concept of justice in Q 18:60–82 just as Jethro challenges Moses’ dispensing of justice in Exodus 18. In both Q 28:24 and 18:63, Moses takes refuge in the dark after being guided to the location of the prophetic figure by supernatural means. In both Q 28:21–8 and 18:60–82, Moses undertakes a long journey and ends up at a miraculous water source. In one report, the color of Moses’ stomach is described as being green, which is representative of the name “Khiḍr,” which means “green” and symbolizes immortality and fertility. Muslim exegetes also include elements familiar from late antiquity accounts of the hairy anchorites and ascetics journeying in search of Elijah or other gnostic masters. The changes affecting Moses also compare with the transformations attributed by Ambrose and other Christian authors to Jacob in his time with Laban.

The rod of Moses itself is explicitly linked with the prophet Shu‘ayb and the prophethood of Moses. According to a *ḥadīth* report preserved in al-Ṭabarī, it was this rod which Adam brought down from the garden of Eden and was eventually passed down through the prophets to Shu‘ayb. Numerous accounts exist in Muslim exegesis about how the rod was passed down, as a mantle of prophethood, from Shu‘ayb to Moses. In many of these, the acquisition of the rod is linked with Moses’ marriage to Zipporah and his assuming of the prophethood. In Jewish sources such as the late pseudepigraphic *Book of Jasher*, Moses finds this rod, made out of sapphire, planted in the garden behind the house of his future father-in-law. According to rabbinic sources, the rod is supposed to be inscribed with the name of God, and because Moses was able to read this name he was able to take the rod from the ground and win Zipporah in marriage, although all the other people of Midian could not move the rod from the ground.

Moses and Alexander

Q 18:60–82 stands out among all the Moses stories in the Qur’ān for a number of reasons. In this passage, Moses and his unnamed companion set out to the ends of the earth, lose a fish that disappears through a tunnel in the water, and meet another unnamed servant of God, at which point Moses’ original companion disappears. This is followed by Q 18:83–102, which describes the exploits of Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn, an epithet usually assigned to Alexander the Great but also attributed to Moses by Muslim as well as Jewish and Christian exegetes.

Lost fish

Muslim exegetes explain that the fish mentioned in Q 18:60–5 was dead and was brought back to life when it was washed in the water of life by Moses and his companion, who is identified as Joshua b. Nūn. This is a motif found in earlier Greek and Syriac recensions of the *Alexander Romance*, themselves based upon literary motifs and themes

taken from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh searches for and finds Utnapishtim, an immortal being who lives at the mouth of the rivers, whereas Moses finds Khidr at the “junction of the two waters” (*majma‘ al-baḥrayn*) mentioned in Q 18:60 and 61.

Muslim exegetes link Q 18:60–82 with Alexander and Gilgamesh stories through the motif of the fish. Al-Ṭabarī records a number of reports in which the fish escapes through a rock passage, swims away, leaving dry land in its wake, and is discovered whole after having been eaten. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) states that the fish’s resurrection was intended as a sign to Moses that he had reached the meeting place of the two waters and the secret location of the prophet Khidr.

The Syriac sermon on Alexander by Jacob of Serugh also describes how an old man tells Alexander to command his cook to take a salted fish and wash it in every spring until the fish comes back to life. The *Babylonian Talmud*, Tamid 32a–b, contains an account of Alexander washing salted fish in a well that he then discovers contains the water of life coming from the Garden of Eden. Several Greek versions of the Alexander stories include the fish episode, and in some the cook who discovers the water of life drinks the water and becomes immortal himself.

Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn

In part, the association of Q 18:60–102 with the Alexander stories was due to the Muslim exegetical identification of Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn with Alexander the Great. Although many early Muslim exegetes propose different identifications for Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn, it is likely that an exegetical consensus emerged surrounding the character’s affiliation with both Alexander and Moses. A large bulk of the motifs associated with Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn may have come from traditions linked to the pre-Islamic South Arabian king called by the same name, and circulated under the name of the early Muslim exegete Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 110/728).

Many of the elements in the stories of this South Arabian Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn can be found in Greek, Syriac, Persian, and Ethiopic recensions of the *Alexander Romance* including the mention of al-Khidr, the rubies in the land of darkness, and the angel’s gift of the heavy stone and the bunch of grapes. The fuller versions of the stories of Dhū ‘l-Qarnayn, drawing upon the *Alexander Romance* and South Arabian traditions, seem to have emerged as the dominant exegesis of Q 18:60–102 as early as the eleventh century. This included the Persian *Iskandarnamah*, Firdawsī’s *Shahnamah*, and the Ethiopic recensions of the thirteenth century.

Gilgamesh and Alexander

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the immediate cause of Gilgamesh’s journey in search of Utnapishtim is the death of Gilgamesh’s companion Enkidu. Gilgamesh travels through the gate at the Mashu mountains, and for twelve leagues through the land of darkness,

until he arrives at a garden in which gems grow, by the edge of the sea. In the garden, Gilgamesh meets the young woman Sidduri who tells him about Urshanabi, who might ferry Gilgamesh across the sea to Utnapishtim. The two travel together for three days until arriving at Dilmun where Utnapishtim and his wife live. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh two secrets of the gods: the story of the flood, and about the existence of a plant at the bottom of the sea which restores men to their youth. Gilgamesh retrieves the plant but, on his return to his home in Uruk to share the plant with his companions, a snake comes and eats the plant.

Several of the elements in this section of the epic parallel episodes from the various Alexander stories, such as the Mashu mountains, the land of darkness, gems, and the long ocean journey. There is little doubt that, on this episode in particular, the Alexander stories are drawing upon themes earlier associated with Gilgamesh. Unlike the immediate pretext in the Alexander stories, Gilgamesh is not seeking only or even primarily immortality, but rather is seeking the justice of Enkidu's and his own impending death. In this sense, Gilgamesh's questioning of Utnapishtim recalls Moses' questioning of Khidr in the exegesis of Q 18:60–82. Muslim exegesis appears to draw a parallel between the failures of Gilgamesh and Alexander. Both Gilgamesh and Alexander fail to gain immortality either for themselves or for their people. But, more important is that Gilgamesh fails to find a satisfactory answer to his friend's death other than fate, and Alexander is not able to conquer the world, whether by means of obtaining his own immortality, ascending to heaven, or with the force of his army.

By interpreting Q 18:60–102 in light of these extra-Qur'ānic stories, Muslim exegesis is able to show how the Qur'ān is inclusive of earlier stories and revelations. It allows the exegetes to contend that these earlier stories are part of the revelation already contained in the Qur'ān and can only be shown to be such from the privileged position of the exegetes. It also enables the exegetes to build intertextual links between different verses relative to Moses in their larger design to evaluate his character and compare it with the prophet Muḥammad.

Meeting place of the two waters

Muslim exegesis uses the unusual term “meeting place of the two waters” from Q 18:60 and 61 to emphasize the link between Gilgamesh, Alexander, and Moses. Although there are no clear parallels between this expression and elements from earlier stories, it seems to be used to signify the garden of Eden from which the water of life flows in the Alexander stories, and the “mouth of the waters” at which Gilgamesh discovers Utnapishtim. Muslim exegesis also compares Moses' journey to the meeting place of the two waters with the “water” of Midian mentioned in Q 28:24 to which Moses also travels. All of the associations of Moses with fertility, strength, and prophethood can be associated with his parallel journey and meeting with the prophet Shu'ayb.

Muslim exegetes make this connection explicit by explaining that the meeting place of the two waters is where the Persian Sea and Roman Sea meet. Al-Zamakhsharī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and Ibn Kathīr indicate that the Roman Sea, normally identified as

the Mediterranean Sea, and the Persian Sea, identified as the Indian Ocean, only meet at the ends of the earth where the waters of the oceans flow together and surround the continents. Qatāda pinpoints this location as the place where the Persian Sea is the farthest east and the Roman Sea is the farthest west. Other exegetes locate the place at the western or eastern extreme of the world, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī says the water of the meeting place is from the garden of Eden.

Dhū 'l-Qarnayn as Moses

Muslim exegetes also make a direct connection between Moses and Alexander through the epithet Dhū 'l-Qarnayn. According to Wahb b. Munabbih, some say that both Alexander and Moses had horns on their heads. In Jewish and Christian literature, both Alexander and Moses are portrayed as having actual horns on their heads. Jerome's Latin translation of Moses being horned in Exodus 34:29 is one example of this, later rendered into Anglo-Saxon vernacular translations of the Bible in fourteenth-century Europe. In his commentary on Exodus 34:29, Rashi states that Moses' face looked as though it was horned. Muslim exegesis also regards Moses' face as having changed after he spoke directly with God on Mt. Sinai so that his face had to be covered with a piece of silk when he appeared before the Israelites.

Even more integral to the purposes of the Muslim exegetes is the explanation that *dhū 'l-qarnayn* refers to the one who reached the two points (*qarns*) of the sun, the place of its rising and the place of its setting. In Q 18:60–1 Moses sets off to the meeting place of the two waters which is understood as being located at the ends of the earth. In Q 18:86 and 18:90 Dhū 'l-Qarnayn reaches the place where the sun rises and where the sun sets in the extreme east and west. Muslim exegesis uses this conflation of motifs to draw upon the major theme of the *Alexander Romance*, which is Alexander's quest to the ends of the earth to find immortality. Dhū 'l-Qarnayn is the one who goes to the end of the earth, whether Moses or Alexander, in both cases in search of personal immortality and fame.

Muslim exegesis thus suggests a clear biblical precedent for Moses' challenges to God's authority in Q 18:60–82 and in other passages such as Q 28:33–4 and 20:25–32. Ubayy b. Ka'b reports that Moses stood up in the midst of the Israelites and stated that he was the most knowledgeable of people, thus claiming God's revelation as his own. This parallels Exodus 18:17–27 in which Moses is chided by his Midianite father-in-law for judging the Israelites on his own, a passage which the rabbis also took as an indictment of Moses' self-importance.

Moses in Q 18 and 28

What the Muslim exegetes emphasize with all of these connections is an exegetical image of Moses who is like Alexander the Great but unlike the prophet Muḥammad. Q 18:60–82 portrays a Moses like Alexander in that Moses refuses to attribute his

knowledge to God and boasts that he will travel to the ends of the earth to prove this. The humiliation Moses experiences because of his ignorance of the reasons behind Khidr's actions shows that Moses' own knowledge is not of the same type as the divine knowledge that he was given by God.

The details of Q 18:60–102 were such that Muslim exegetes could and did see in them reflections of popular late antique motifs which they could use to build certain exegetical images supportive of their own authority. Muslim exegesis is able to draw together disparate motifs to the features of the Qur'ān passages on Moses, including a strong Jewish tradition about Alexander's pride and attempts to enter the garden of Eden as reflected in the Latin *Iter ad Paradisum*, the Hebrew *Sefer Aleksandros Moqdon*, and the *Babylonian Talmud*.

Muslim exegesis draws from this image the full "lesson" of Q 18:60–102, a lesson that both contrasts Moses with the prophet Muḥammad and legitimates the authority of the exegesis itself. Muḥammad was illiterate and did not enjoy the special education of Moses in the house of Pharaoh. Muslim exegetes refer to Muḥammad as a "servant-prophet" as opposed to the "king-prophet" model exemplified by Moses. The prophet Muḥammad based his authority only on the knowledge he received as revelation, not on his own learning. His position was as messenger of God, not as king among his people.

Conclusions

The Muslim exegetes owe their own position and authority to their transmission and continuation of the prophetic knowledge originating with Muḥammad. The exegetical lesson of Moses is that Islam and Muḥammad demand a simple obedience, not a questioning of the reasons for God's instructions. The exegetes show that it is only with knowledge from the prophet Muḥammad that the Qur'ān can be understood properly, and that this understanding reinforces the structure of authority upon which the exegesis is based. It is reinforced by the understanding of the Qur'ān as stressing not the abstract qualities of good and evil, but rather the distinction between right and wrong, legal and illegal. The archetypal act of disobedience by Moses is his claim that he himself, without the aid of God, knows what is right and wrong. Throughout the Qur'ān, acknowledging God and his role as creator is defined as obedience to the revealed message of the prophets, the message to focus and direct oneself to God alone.

The exegesis of the Moses story in the Qur'ān demonstrates how Muslim exegetes drew upon non-Qur'ānic sources to legitimate their own authority. This exegesis thus preserves a wealth of information on Moses including oral sources not put into writing before the Islamic period, direct influences from Jewish and Christian groups, and an exchange of ideas among people interested in using biblical stories to formulate their self-identity.

Note

- 1 Because the aim of this chapter is to explore the Qur'ānic Moses and the way that has been developed in Islamic tradition in general, explicit exegetical references are not provided in this chapter. Much of the material which is cited is repeated in various works of Muslim exegesis. More complete references are found in Wheeler (2002) for readers who wish to pursue the details.

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CHAPTER 17

Abraham

Carol Bakhos

Second only to Moses, Abraham figures prominently in the Qurʾān and plays an important role in the theological history of Islam. More than 245 verses of the Qurʾān refer to Abraham, although as is typical of this text, the references are scattered in several *sūras*. His life is not sequentially narrated, nor is it replete with details. First and foremost he is depicted as the original true monotheist and the prototypical Muslim: “Truly, Abraham was a model of virtue, obedient to God, upright, and not one of those who associate” (Q 16:120; see also Q 6:75–84; 14:37; 19:41–50; 21:51–75; 26:69–104). Various appellations such as, most commonly, *khalīl Allāh*, “Friend of God” (Q 4:125), and *ḥanīf*,¹ “upright” or “pure of faith,” as well as *ṣiddīq*, “truthful,” are used to describe him. The Qurʾān also makes reference to *millat Ibrāhīm*, which occurs in six Qurʾānic verses: 2:130, 2:135, 3:95, 4:125, 6:161, 16:123. Commonly glossed as “religion of Abraham” (*dīn Ibrāhīm*, an expression not found in the Qurʾān), what *millat Ibrāhīm* consists of is not defined in the Qurʾān, although it has been suggested that it centered around the practices of circumcision and sacrifice (Cook and Crone 1977: 12–13). The term *milla* may have been adapted from Hebrew or Aramaic, or from the Syriac *mellā*, which, as Hawting avers, “is sometimes used for the Greek *logos*” (Hawting 2010: 479–80; see also Buhl and Bosworth, “Milla,” *EI2* 2004: VII, 61. Noteworthy is the appearance of the word *ḥanīf* in these passages).

According to the Qurʾān, Abraham is neither a Jew nor a Christian but rather the paradigmatic monotheist, the quintessential Muslim, who vies against idolatry:

And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising up the foundations of the House [they prayed]: “Our Lord, Accept [this] from us, for You are the Hearer, the Knower. Our Lord, Make us submitters [*muslimayn*] to You and our progeny a submissive people to You. Show

us the ritual places and turn toward us, for You are the most relenting, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a messenger from among them who will recite for them Your signs and teach them the Book and wisdom and make them pure and good. For You are the Mighty, the Wise." Who could dislike the religion of Abraham other than those who fool themselves? We have chosen him in [this] world. And in the hereafter, he is among the righteous. When the Lord said to him: Surrender [*aslim*]! He answered: "I surrender to the Lord of the universe." Abraham charged his sons, as did Jacob: "O my sons! God has chosen the right religion for you. When you die, die as submitters to God." (Q 2:127–32)

As mentioned above, a term commonly used to describe Abraham is the problematic term *ḥanīf*, which is often left untranslated. Translations into English include: "upright," "firm and true," "true believer," "true monotheist." In other Semitic languages (Syriac *hanpā* and the Hebrew *ḥānēf*) the term seems to take on the opposite meaning of the Qur'ānic and Islamic usage of pure monotheism. In contrast it conveys the sense of "heathen" or "pagan." The term appears in the Qur'ān in the following passages: 2:135, 3:67, 95; 4:125; 6:79, 161; 16:120, 123; 30:30, and in eight of these instances it refers explicitly to Abraham, five of which include the phrase *millat Ibrāhīm*. It also appears twice in the plural, *ḥunaḥā'*: 22:31 and 98:5.

While scholars have attempted to explain the term in various ways, the most plausible explanation is that these *ḥanīfs* are portrayed as people who reject the polytheism of their fellow Arabs, but accept neither Judaism nor Christianity. They are often portrayed as people who adhere to elements of the religion of Abraham, and thus the religion of Abraham is associated with *ḥanīf* (*dīn Ibrāhīm: al-ḥanīfiyya*; Hawting 2010: 489).

In the Bible we first meet Abraham in Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 12) when God summons him, whereas the Qur'ān only alludes to his emigration (Q 19:48–9, 21:71, 29:26 and 37:99). Although the Qur'ān does not mention his extraordinary birth, his marriage to Sarah, and their journey westward, the Tales of the Prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) and *tafsīr* literature provide many details about these events. Nor are we told explicitly that Abraham rejected the beliefs of the Chaldeans, who were widely known for "their mastery of astronomy and astrology" (the two pursuits were a single field in ancient times; see Kugel 2007: 93). Ancient interpreters took his willingness to leave as a sign of his abandoning their ways, and the Qur'ān relates his moment of enlightenment. The first sustained reference to it is found in the sixth *sūra*, "The Cattle" (al-Anām), where unbelievers are summoned to submit to the Lord of all the worlds, the most powerful and all knowing, and to follow His guidance. In fact, the renunciation of other idols is embedded within this sixth *sūra*, which on the whole both celebrates God as the creator of all, who is omnipotent as well as omnipresent, and draws attention to the waywardness of unbelievers. Within this context we read about Abraham's father, named "Āzar" in the Qur'ān, whom Abraham rebukes for taking idols as gods. He reprimands him and his people for straying. At that point, God shows him the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, so that he might be of those who possess certainty:

When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, "This is my Lord," but when it set, he said, "I do not like things that set." And when he saw the moon rising he said, "This is my Lord," but when it too set, he said, "If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be one of

those who go astray." Then he saw the sun rising and cried, "This is my Lord! This is greater!" But when the sun set, he said, "My people, I am free from all who associate with God. I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the idolaters." (6:76–80)

Abraham's contemplation of the celestial realm brings him recognition of God, but that is the result not of meditating on the heavenly orbs, but rather of God's revelation to Abraham: "Thus We showed Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, so that he might be of those who possess certainty" (Q 6:75). In Islamic sources Abraham's revelation is brought about by God's own active participation to make him "rightly guided." Islamic sources highlight Abraham's discovery of God through his heavenly gaze and contemplation of the celestial realm. In general, whereas in Jewish sources (Jubilees 12:16–20; Josephus, *Antiquities* I.7.1; the *Apocalypse of Abraham*; Philo and *Genesis Rabbah* 39:1) Abraham is depicted as a seeker who through intellection discovers God, the Islamic exegetical tradition emphasizes the active role God plays in Abraham's discovery of the Divine.

The sixth *sūra* ends with a recapitulation of many of the themes and exhortations expressed throughout, and links Muḥammad directly to Abraham. Muḥammad is warned to keep clear of divisive figures, and to proclaim that he is guided on the straight path, in the religion of Abraham who was not an idolater. The final verses remind the reader of the episode between Abraham and his father, and proclaim the greatness of the one true, creator God: "Say, 'should I seek a Lord other than God, when He is the Lord of all things?'" (6:164).

The most prevalent Qur'ānic image of Abraham is that of the defiant son who ardently battles against his father's idolatry. He is the believer in God *par excellence*, and because of his unflinching conviction, he incurs the wrath of his own people. Often told in the Qur'ān and with great detail, the story depicts Abraham as the valiant defender of God. Here and elsewhere in the Qur'ān, Abraham is the precursor of the prophet Muḥammad, and like Moses, Abraham serves as a model for Muḥammad, who confronts not only the unbelievers in Mecca, but also the Jews and Christians who do not accept his revelation.

A dialogue between Abraham and his father is also found in Qur'ān 19:42–8. The son implores his father to follow him on the right path and to cease from worshiping Satan lest he be punished. In turn his father threatens to have Abraham stoned. Once he leaves his father and rejects his idols, God rewards Abraham for this: "Thus, when he left them and the [idols] they worshiped, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, and made each of them a prophet, And bestowed on them some of Our blessings, and gave them high renown" (Q 19:49).

In the third account, which is presented below, Abraham smashes the idols and, as a result, faces life-threatening consequences:

We had earlier given Abraham true direction, for We knew him well. When he said to his father and his people: "What are these idols to which you cling so passionately?" They replied, "We found our fathers worshiping them." He said, "You and your fathers are in

clear error." They replied, "Are you speaking in earnest, or only jesting?" He responded: "In fact it was your Lord, the Lord of the heavens and earth, who created them; and I bear witness to this. I swear by God I will do something to your idols when you have turned your back and gone." So he smashed them up to pieces with the exception of the biggest, so that they may turn to it. [When they returned] they asked, "Who has done this to our gods? He is surely a mischief-monger." They said, "We heard a youth talk about them. He is called Abraham." "Bring him before the people," they said, "that they may bear witness." "Did you do this to our gods, O Abraham?" they enquired. "No," he said. "It was done by that chief of theirs. Ask him in case they can speak." Then they thought and observed: "Surely you are yourselves unjust." Then crestfallen [they confessed]: "Truly, as you know, they cannot speak." Abraham replied, "Then why do you worship something apart from God that cannot profit you or do you harm? Fie on you and those you worship besides God! Will you not understand?" They retorted, "Burn him, and save your gods, if you are men of action." "Turn cold, O fire," We said, "and give safety to Abraham." They wished to entrap him, but We made them greater losers. So We delivered him and Lot, and brought them to the land We had blessed for all people. And we bestowed on him Isaac, and Jacob as an additional gift, and made them righteous. And we made them leaders to guide (the people) by Our command... (Q 21:51–73)

Muslim accounts found in the Tales of the Prophets genre discuss these events in greater detail. Abraham confronts death at the hands of Nimrod. Moreover, the story is told with an emphasis on God's saving power toward those who believe and follow him.

A further passage that reiterates several themes already discussed above is Qur'ān 26:68–86, which highlights God's might and mercy. Abraham pronounces his complete reliance on God, who sustains him with food and drink, who heals him and will cause him to die and renew his life. Then Abraham prays that he might be considered among the righteous and be counted among the inheritors of Paradise. He furthermore asks for forgiveness on behalf of himself and his father, who "was surely among those who went astray" (26:86).

Abraham's Trials

The Qur'ān (2:124) states that God tests Abraham with many commandments but does not specify what they are. The list of trials Abraham faces in some Islamic texts deals with Islamic ritual practices: rinsing the mouth, clearing the nostrils with water, trimming the moustache and nails, using the toothstick, plucking the armpit, shaving pubic hair, washing between fingers, cleansing the rear and vulva, and circumcision. Opinions vary. Others note that six of the commands have to do with the person and four with the cultic stations: walking around the Ka'ba, running between al-Şafā and al-Marwa, stoning the pillars, and hurrying. And still others understand the trials in terms of Abraham's appointment as a leader for humankind, and pilgrimage rituals. There is indeed mention of other trials, including his emigration, and the sacrifice of his son. Abraham's rejection of the star, sun, and moon is also considered a form of test, as is

his trial by fire at the hands of Nimrod. And in every instance, Abraham displays his singular devotion to the one true God.

Battle with Nimrod (Namrūd)

In the Qurʾān, Abraham has to contend with the idol worshipers around him who cast him into the fire, but he lacks an antagonist. Adam is challenged by Satan, Moses by Pharaoh, but Abraham has no evil counterpart mentioned by name. Reference, however, is made to an arrogant, blaspheming ruler who confronts Abraham and contends that he, not God, has power over life and death:

Have you not heard of him who argued with Abraham about his Lord because God had bestowed sovereignty upon him? Abraham said, "My Lord is he who has the power of life and death." "I, too," replied the other, "have the power of life and death." "God brings up the sun from the east," said Abraham. "Bring it up yourself from the West." The unbeliever was confounded. God does not guide the evil-doers. (Q 2:258)

Muslim exegetes and story-tellers give the one who contended with Abraham an identity: Nimrod. This confrontation is one of a series recounted between him and Abraham.

Works of the Tales of the Prophets genre provide ample details that embellish his role as God's arch-rival. Nimrod was Abraham's contemporary and pretended to have the power to give and take life. Nimrod claims to have created humans and given them sustenance. It is Abraham who defeats Nimrod at every turn, thus demonstrating the power of the one true God.

The Sacrifice of Abraham's Son

Muslims commemorate the near sacrifice of Ishmael on the great feast, Eid al-Adha, which marks the end of the *hajj* period. Both father and son are exemplars of complete submission to the will of God in the Qurʾānic narrative, which is cited below:

"Lord, grant me a righteous son!" So We gave him the good news that he would have a patient son. When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said, "My son, I have seen myself sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?" He said, "Father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me steadfast." When they had both submitted to God, and he had laid his son down on the side of his face, We called out to him, "Abraham, you have fulfilled the dream." This is how We reward those who do good – it was a test to prove – We ransomed his son with a momentous sacrifice, and We let him be praised by succeeding generations: "Peace be upon Abraham!" This is how we reward those who do good: truly he was one of Our faithful servants. (Q 37:100–11)

The Qurʾānic account of Abraham's sacrifice lacks many details found in the biblical account. In fact, it does not even identify the son, whether it was Ishmael or Isaac,

a point that later exegetes take up, eventually deciding on the former. Furthermore, the unnamed son in the Qur'ānic account knows of God's command to Abraham, so there are no surprises or any mounting tension of the sort we find in Genesis 22. Abraham tells his son of his dream and both father and son willingly fulfill the command. The latter responds, "Father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me steadfast." While both father and son are portrayed as obedient, Abraham is rewarded in that future generations will praise him. In extra-Qur'ānic sources, the son is also granted a prayer for his willingness to sacrifice himself (al-Ṭabarī).

Stories about Satan (Iblīs) tempting Abraham from going through with the sacrifice abound in Muslim as well as Jewish exegetical sources. For example, after he unsuccessfully tries to thwart the sacrifice by first going to the son's mother and then to the son himself, Satan goes to Abraham. In al-Tha'labī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, he approaches Abraham and asks where he is going, to which Abraham replies, "I have something to do on the trail over there." Satan then tries to convince him that it was Satan who appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to sacrifice his son. Abraham is not seduced in the slightest: "Get away from me, cursed one! In the name of my God, I shall go forth to fulfill the command of my Lord" (Brinner 2002: 160).

Al-Tha'labī reports another tradition (Brinner 2002: 160–1). Satan meets Abraham at the pilgrimage station of al-Muzdalifah and tries to speed ahead, but Abraham arrives before him. When Abraham sees him, he throws seven stones and Satan flees. This happens three times. Abraham throwing stones on three occasions to chase him away is the basis for the ritual stoning of pillars (*jamra*) during the *ḥajj*. In all reports on Satan's attempts to prevent Abraham from fulfilling God's command, Abraham, as well as his son and his son's mother, displays unwavering resolve.

Abraham's visit to Ishmael

As in the biblical story, Abraham casts out Ishmael and Hagar; however, in Islamic sources they are sent away to Mecca: "Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley near your sacred house, so that they may be constant in devotion. Put in the hearts of men kindness towards them, and provide them with the earth's fruits, so that they may give thanks" (Q 14:37). Abraham settles them in Mecca and its environs, rather than bringing them into the wilderness in the vicinity of Palestine. Unlike the biblical account, in which Abraham sends them away with only a bottle of water that runs out, in the Qur'ān he prays for their safety and future well-being. He accompanies them to Mecca, thus fulfilling his responsibility and displaying his love.

The location is important in light of the later episode of the building of the Ka'ba and the pilgrimage to Mecca. The story of Abraham visiting Ishmael serves to establish a bond between Abraham and Ishmael, one which leads to God's command to Abraham to build the Ka'ba with him. Some time passes and Abraham asks Sarah for permission to visit Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah consents with the proviso that Abraham not settle there. Some sources report that he traveled there on al-Burāq (al-Tha'labī

and al-Kisāʿī). Upon arrival, he is greeted by Ishmael's wife. When he inquires as to his son's whereabouts, she tells him that Ishmael is out hunting. Abraham asks her if she could provide hospitality, but she responds that she has nothing to offer. Before departing, Abraham tells her to give Ishmael a message: change the threshold of your door. When Ishmael returns, he senses his father's smell and asks his wife if anyone has come to visit her. She recounts Abraham's visit and what he asked her to convey to his son, at which point Ishmael divorces her and marries another woman.

Abraham again seeks Sarah's permission to visit Ishmael, which again she grants provided he does not settle there. He meets Ishmael's second wife, who tells him that Ishmael has gone hunting, but in the meantime she invites Abraham to stay. She brings him something to eat and drink, and then washes his head while he stands on a stone, called the "Maqām" (in some versions a jug).² Abraham leaves a footprint, which offers an explanation for "Maqām Ibrāhīm," the stone assumed to bear Abraham's footprint found in the Ka'ba. Another tradition relates that Abraham's footprints were imprinted on the stone while he was building the Ka'ba with Ishmael.

One of the most important figures in the Qur'ān, and in Islam's theological history, Abraham is referred to as a friend of God, as a righteous man and a true monotheist. He is the paradigmatic Muslim who rebels against the rampant idolatry of those around him and even defies his own father, who worships idols. He is vindicated against Nimrod, who, threatened by Abraham, tries to kill him and thus defeat God, only to face his own demise. Abraham is the father of a line of prophets and, with his son Ishmael, he builds the Ka'ba in Mecca.

Moreover, Abraham is also the father of the faithful in Islam, in that Muslims follow the religion of Abraham, and all his descendants in the Qur'ān are righteous believers in the one, True God. In Q 2:124 God makes Abraham a leader of humankind. When he inquires as to the fate of his descendants, God responds, "My covenant does not apply to the evil-doers." Whereas in Judaism biological descent from Abraham bestows membership, Muslims often interpret this response to mean that one must follow the path set out by the prophets, and that membership is available to all who do so, not just to Abraham's descendants who do so.

Notes

- 1 The term is associated especially with Abraham, who possesses a pure worship of God, as opposed to idolaters, *mushrikūn*. See, for example, Q. 2:129, 135; 3:67, 95; 4:125; 6:79, 161. On *ḥanīf*, see Wellhausen (1927: 234); William Montgomery Watt, "Ḥanīf," *EI2* (2004: III, 165–6); Rubin (1990: 85–112; 2001); Faris and Glidden (1939: 1–13); Crone and Cook (1977: 13–14). See also de Blois (2002: 1–30); Wansbrough (1978: esp. 4, 6); Rippin (1991: 153–68).
- 2 In fourteen of the seventeen versions of the story found in Islamic medieval sources, Abraham asks her what they eat; in nine of them she responds, "meat and water," and in five her response is "milk and meat."

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CHAPTER 18

Jesus

Gordon Nickel

Introduction

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem displays Arabic inscriptions of what one scholar called the earliest Qurʾānic anti-Christian quotations (Lazarus-Yafeh 1996: 69). The Dome was built in 72/691. In the 240-meter line of Kufic Arabic script along the top of the ambulatories in the interior of the Dome, some 175 out of a total of 370 Arabic words are about the identity of Jesus, here named *ʿĪsā*. The inscriptions indicate the divine Sonship of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity as matters of contention (translated in Calder, Mojaddedi, and Rippin 2013: 134–7).

The Dome inscriptions have been described by another scholar as “the first Islamic religious writings that have been dated thus far and attested to by external documents” (de Prémare 2007: 179). This includes, according to the scholar, extant manuscripts of the Qurʾān. If so, it is remarkable that this early, well-known, explicit public expression of a new faith should concern itself with Jesus to the extent it does.

The tone and content of the material about Jesus in the Dome’s inscriptions do not match the bulk of the material about Jesus in what came to be the *textus receptus* of the Qurʾān. The Dome’s inscriptions are strikingly confrontative, while most of the Qurʾānic material about Jesus is affirmative. However, where the Qurʾānic material is confrontative, especially related to the deity of Jesus, discussion of perceived confessions and polemical denials is much more extensive in the surrounding context.

This short essay will review and discuss the Qurʾānic material on Jesus and describe some of the Muslim understandings of the Jesus verses in the Islamic interpretive

tradition. Those understandings will then be brought up to the present in the areas of modern commentary, interfaith dialogue, and polemic.

Description of the Qurʾānic Material

The first thing the reader of the Qurʾān notices in reading the Arabic text of the Qurʾānic material about Jesus is that he is not called *Yasūʿ*, as one might expect from the Semitic milieu, but rather *ʿĪsā*. In terms of the Arabic root letters, the *ʿayn* and *yā* seem to have switched positions. The name *ʿĪsā* occurs twenty-five times, sixteen of those occurrences together with other names or titles. The main passages with Jesus material are Q 3:33–60, 5:109–20, and 19:1–36, with important isolated verses in the fourth and fifth *sūras*.

Birth accounts

The total material about Jesus in the Qurʾān is not particularly abundant, in contrast to the proportion of material about Jesus in the Dome’s inscriptions. Out of some ninety verses related to Jesus in the Qurʾān, sixty-four belong to the stories of his birth in *sūras* 3 and 19. The remaining twenty-six verses also contain significant repetition, further reducing the basic material on aspects of Jesus’ adult life and ministry. This compares to some 500 verses related to the figure of Moses in the Qurʾān and more than 240 about Abraham.

The birth stories themselves provide many details about Zakariyyā, Yaḥyā, Maryam, and the “wife of ʿImrān,” but relatively few about the infant *ʿĪsā*. The narratives given in Q 3:35–47 and 19:2–33 resemble some of the content and tone of Luke 1 and Matthew 1, as well as some Christian apocryphal stories. Angels bring Maryam news of a “word” (*kalima*) from God “whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary” (Q 3:45). When Maryam asks how this is possible, the answer is, “God creates what he wants. When he decrees a thing, he only says ‘Be,’ and it is” (Q 3:47). Elsewhere the details are more personal: “We sent unto her our spirit that presented himself to her a man without fault” (Q 19:17). “We breathed into her of our spirit and appointed her and her son to be a sign unto all beings” (Q 21:91; cf. 66:12).

The birth stories offer a few further references to the identity of Jesus. The spirit (*rūḥ*) of God announces to Mary that her son will be a “pure (*zakī*) boy” (Q 19:18). One of these Qurʾānic stories states that Jesus will speak to humankind in the cradle (Q 3:46; cf. 5:110), and the second account offers the words of his speech: “I am the servant of God. He gave me the book and made me a prophet...” (Q 19:30). This theme of Jesus speaking as a child is also known from Christian apocryphal writings, as is the story of the birth pangs of Mary under a palm tree (Q 19:22–6).

Jesus is called the son (*ibn*) of Maryam twenty-three times in the Qurʾān. He is also called the Messiah (*al-Masīḥ*) some eleven times. The Qurʾān does not explain *al-Masīḥ* to mean “anointed” – its sense in the original Hebrew *Māshiah* and its Greek translation *Christos*. Rather, “Messiah” in the Qurʾān seems to be given as another of Jesus’ names.

Material on the adult Jesus is scattered throughout the scripture and is often enigmatic. The complexity of the Qur'ānic portrait of Jesus is best indicated in Q 4:171, a list of affirmations and denials addressed to the People of the Book but of specific interest to Christians. Affirmations in the list include the identity of Jesus son of Maryam as the Messiah, the word (*kalima*) of God "that he committed to Mary," and a spirit (*rūḥ*) from God. However, Jesus is also "only the messenger of God." Denials in the list include the divine Sonship of Jesus and, apparently, the confession that he is one of three persons in the Godhead. The concern in this verse is explicitly theological: "Do not go beyond the proper bounds in your religion and do not say about God anything except the truth." The dense – and even formulaic – nature of such Qur'ānic statements on Jesus, and their apparent polemical earnestness and urgency, encourage a close reading of the terms in which the portrait is developed.

The Qur'ān associates the Gospel (*injīl*) with ʿĪsā. According to Q 3:48, God teaches Jesus the Gospel, along with "the book and the wisdom and the Torah (*tawrā*)" (also Q 5:110). In Q 5:46 God gives Jesus the Gospel (also Q 57:27), confirming what was in the Torah. The Gospel is said to contain "guidance and light" (Q 5:46). Beyond this, however, the Qur'ān does not address the nature of the *injīl* or describe its actual message. There are also a number of references to the disciples of Jesus, using the term *ḥawāriyyūn*. The disciples appear at Q 3:52 when Jesus appeals, "Who will be my helpers unto God?" They respond positively, describing themselves as believers in God, witnesses and Muslims (Q 3:53–4; cf. 5:111). At Q 5:112–15 the disciples ask Jesus for a table spread with food from heaven as a sign that he has spoken truth to them. These Qur'ānic disciples appear to support Jesus in a battle against their enemies, and overcome them (Q 61:14).

Miracles

The Qur'ānic statement about the miracles of Jesus also appears twice. One verse provides the statement in the words of Jesus (Q 3:49), while the other gives it in the first-person speech of God (Q 5:110). In common, the verses state that Jesus creates (*khalaqa*) a bird from clay and blows life into it; heals the blind and the leper; and gives life to the dead. The version of the statement as the speech of God is peppered with the expression "by my permission" (*bi-idhnī*). In addition to these four miracles, the Qur'ān tells of a response to a request from the disciples of Jesus to send down a table from heaven spread with food (Q 5:112–15), and the ability of Jesus to announce to people what they eat and what they store in their houses (Q 3:49). These statements of miracles are not further explained in their Qur'ānic contexts, and have challenged both Muslim interpreters and academic scholars. As one scholar observed about the "table" verses, "[i]t is an absolutely opaque story" (Peters 2001: 267).

Death of Jesus

The death of Jesus is referred to in the Qur'ān in a variety of ways that have made it difficult to understand the Arabic text and to translate it into other languages. For example, George Sale translated Q 3:55, "When God said, O Jesus, verily I will cause

thee to die, and I will take thee unto me....," while Arthur Arberry later translated the same words, "When God said, 'Jesus, I will take thee to Me, and will raise thee to Me....'" The principle verse on the death of Jesus is Q 4:157, which states that the Jews did not kill Jesus, in spite of their claim to have done so. Here too, however, a crucial expression has been translated in a wide variety of ways, from Sale's "but he was represented by one in his likeness" to Arberry's "only a likeness of that was shown to them."

The Qur'ānic Jesus speaks of his own death from the cradle, "Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive" (Q 19:33). The three verbs match those in a statement about Yaḥyā earlier in the same *sūra*: "Peace on him the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he shall be raised alive" (Q 19:15). Other materials include the statement in a passage that seems to argue against Jesus' deity: "The Messiah son of Maryam was no other than a messenger; messengers had passed away prior to him" (Q 5:75). At Q 5:117 in another speech of 'Īsā the same difficult expression of Q 3:55 reappears, "and when Thou didst take me to Thyself" (Arberry); which also, noted Sale, can be translated "since thou hast caused me to die."

Related to the death of Jesus, some scholars have speculated about the role of Jesus in the Qur'ān and have concluded that it is a typically *Muslim* role. The stories of many prophets seem to follow a repeated pattern. In this "prophetic pattern," God sends a messenger to a particular people with his message. The messenger delivers the message faithfully, but the people do not listen. The messenger then warns the people about the consequences of not listening, and in response the people begin to manhandle the messenger. God then intervenes, delivering his messenger from danger and destroying the people who resisted the messenger. The ambiguity of the materials related to the death of Jesus in the Qur'ān may possibly be due to the difficulty of trying to fit the story of Jesus into this pattern.

Deity of Jesus

The Qur'ān also addresses the deity of Jesus in a number of passages. Chief among these are the two verses that comment on the perceived confession, "God is the Messiah, son of Maryam" (Q 5:17 and 72). In both verses the judgment of the Qur'ān is that those who make this confession "have disbelieved (*kafara*)."¹ The truth, according to Q 5:17, is that sovereignty of the heavens and the earth belongs to God. "Who then shall overrule God in any way if he desires to destroy the Messiah, son of Maryam, and his mother, and all those who are on earth?" asks the Qur'ān. At 5:17 it is the Qur'ānic Messiah himself who answers the confession. "O Children of Israel, worship God, my lord and your lord. To whoever associates with God, God has forbidden paradise." A detail is advanced in the context of this second passage that helps accentuate the point. The Messiah was no more than a messenger, according to Q 5:75. Both he and his mother used to eat food.

At a number of points the Qur'ān refers to a notion of trinity. The complex list of affirmations and denials at Q 4:171 contains the imperative, "Do not say 'three' (*thalātha*)."² At Q 5:73, set in parallel with the perceived confession "God is the Messiah," is the confession "God is the third of three." Those who say this have disbelieved and will be punished if they do not stop, according to Q 5:73. Rather, "there is no god except one God." The Qur'ānic Jesus himself answers the perceived false confession at Q 5:116.

God asks Jesus whether he said, “Take me and my mother for two gods apart from Allāh.” Jesus’ answer is extensive: “To you be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, you know it, knowing what is in my soul, and I know not what is within your soul: You know the things unseen. I only said to them what you commanded me: ‘Serve God, my lord and your lord.’” Passages in which the Qur’ānic Jesus responds to perceived confessions about him (also Q 5:72, cf. 3:51, 43:64) present not only a concept of his identity but also an assertion of how Jesus himself understood his identity in relation to God.

It is not clear whether the many Qur’ānic statements about the “son (or offspring, *walad*) of God” always refer to Jesus, but in a number of passages the connection is made explicit. Immediately after the birth narrative of Jesus in *sūra* 19, the Qur’ān states that it is not appropriate for God to take to himself a son (Q 19:35). “The Messiah, ʿĪsā son of Mary,” is also clearly indicated in Q4:171, where it is stated, “Far be it from [God] (*subḥānahu*) that he should have a son.” The connection is also explicit in Q 9:30, which states, “the Christians say the Messiah is the son (*ibn*) of God.” The Dome inscriptions include the wording of Q 19:35 and 4:171, and add 17:111: “Praise be to God, who has not taken to himself a son, and who has no partner in sovereignty, nor any protector out of humbleness.” The Dome also features the expression similar to *sūra* 112, both in the interior inscriptions and over the East and North Doors: “[God] does not beget nor was he begotten.”

Qur’ānic statements on “son of Allāh” often understand the perceived false confession to be that God “takes to himself” (*ittakhadha*) a son (Q 2:116; 10:68; 17:111; 19:35, 88, 92). The longest single passage on son of God calls this confession “a hideous thing,” such that at its utterance, “the heavens are almost torn, and the earth is split asunder and the mountains fall in ruins” (Q 19:89–90). Other verses provide possible reasons for the explosiveness of such expressions. Is it because “son of God” is taken to mean that God has had relations with a female companion (*ṣāḥiba*, Q 6:101)? Is it the understanding that “son of God” implies that God is not self-sufficient? “He has no needs. All that is in the heavens and the earth is his” (Q 10:68). Suggestions of divine Sonship, or the deity of Jesus, are often met in the Qur’ān with the affirmation of God’s sovereignty (*mulk*, Q 5:17) and the strong denial that he needs a partner (*sharīk*, Q 17:111; 5:72). “He has no protector (*walī*) out of humbleness (*dhull*)” (Q 17:111). The difficult expression for God at Q 112:2, *ṣamad*, has often been understood to mean that God is not in need of anything, while all else is in need of him. Several verses exclaim “glory to him!” (*subḥānahu*) at the confession that God would have a son (Q 2:116; 4:171; 10:68; 19:35). This seems to suggest that saying God has a son impinges on, or insults, God’s glory. The notion is made explicit at Q 19:92: “it is not appropriate (*yanbaghī*) that God should take to himself a son.”

Lacunae in the Qur’ānic Portrait

While a birth story of Jesus appears in the Qur’ān in two versions or “variant traditions,” strengthened with extra-biblical themes and details, the Qur’ān offers little from the store of other stories about Jesus known in the Middle East in the seventh century

through the Gospel accounts. There is nothing here about the teachings of Jesus. There is no narrative context provided for the miracle statements that could show the behavior of Jesus with the individuals involved. No hint is given of Jesus' polemical encounters with religious authorities, the hatred and enmity that his claims provoked, or the trial before the "chief priests and teachers of the law" that declared Jesus worthy of death.

In the narratives of Jesus' birth given in the Gospel accounts, the angel announces to Joseph, "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Such a connection between name and meaning is lost in the Qur'ān because the Arabic *ʿĪsā* communicates no sense of salvation. The background to the name Jesus (Greek *Iēsou*) assumed by the Gospel writer is the Hebrew name Joshua (*Yahôshūa'*), which means "Yahweh saves." The final root consonant of the Hebrew verb *hōshîa'* ("to save") is *ayin*. By contrast, the Qur'ānic name *ʿĪsā* makes *ʿayn* the initial consonant. The possible etymological connection to the concept of salvation is thus lost. Perhaps related to this, a number of scholars have observed in the Qur'ān's portrait of Jesus a lack of interest in the themes of sacrifice, redemption, atonement, and salvation (Lazarus-Yafeh 1981: 57; Hawting 1994: 170–1).

The extensive material in the Gospel passion accounts also seems to be negated in the Qur'ān through a few enigmatic expressions which are not further qualified in scripture. Q 4:157 states clearly that the Jews did not kill Jesus. But what is the reader to understand from *shubbiha lahum*? What actually happened? Does Q 3:55 mean to say, "I am causing you to die (*mutawaffika*)," or something different? The twenty-three other occurrences of the verb *tawaffa* in the Qur'ān have to do with death, and are generally rendered as such in translation. On what basis would that meaning not apply in Q 3:55? In any case, the Qur'ān makes no further mention of Jesus' suffering and death.

Tone and Context

The tone of the birth narratives in *sūras* 3 and 19, which take up more than two thirds of the Qur'ānic material on Jesus, is largely affirmative. The two versions appear without substantial following discussion of their implications for the identity of Jesus, beyond the brief statement at Q 19:35 that "it is not for God to take a son unto himself." The stories seem to be offered in a familiar story-book fashion to an accepting audience. By contrast, the verses that refer to other aspects of Jesus' identity give signs of emerging from a context of confrontation, and contain some strikingly emotional and even political expressions.

For example, the statement at Q 9:30 that "...the Christians say, 'the Messiah is the son of God'" contains the vigorous response, "God fights against (*qātala*) them. How they are perverted!" This is set in the midst of an important discussion of the relationship of "believers" with "those who have been given the book." The passage continues with the statement that Christians have taken the Messiah as lord (*rabb*) "...when they were commanded to worship only one god" (Q 9:31). The Qur'ān responds with a strong statement of disapproval (9:32). This is followed by the claim that God has "sent his messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that he may cause it to prevail

over all religion, even though the associators (*mushrikūn*) hate it" (9:33). The passage subsequently describes many of the rabbis and monks as those who "devour the wealth of humankind wantonly" (9:34), and announces their future as a painful doom (9:35). This entire passage is preceded by the famous verse of *jizya* (tribute), the command to fight (*qātala*) the People of the Book "until they pay the *jizya* out of hand and have been humbled."

The tone of this entire passage is highly polemical and suggests that the denial of Jesus' divine Sonship was an important concern for the Qur'ān, that the Qur'ān took offense at the perceived Christian confession, and that this offense connected on the one hand to punishment on the judgment day and on the other hand to political domination and religious supersession. It is interesting that similar wording to that of Q 9:33 (and also 61:9) appears above the North Door to the Dome of the Rock, introduced by the explicit claim, "Muḥammad is the servant of God and his messenger."

Another example is the discussion of Jesus' identity after the extended description of Jesus in Q 3:48–59. The passage ends with the statement, "the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him, 'Be!' and he is" (Q 3:59). This claim that Jesus was merely a created human is now said to be the truth about Jesus and the true narrative (*al-qaṣaṣ al-ḥaqq*) (Q 3:60, 62). If after this point there is disagreement with this recitation, according to Q 3:61, the disputant must submit to a mutual cursing ceremony in which the one who lies will be cursed. There is no ultimatum of this nature over any other theological disagreement signaled in the Qur'ān.

A third example is the explosive expression that follows the perceived confession at Q 5:17, "God is the Messiah, son of Maryam." The response to this is, "Who then shall overrule God in any way if he desires to destroy the Messiah, son of Maryam and his mother, and all those who are on earth?" The rhetoric of this response seems disproportionate to the confession and indicates a major concern of the Qur'ān. A similar expression comes at Q 19:89–91 in response to the perceived confession, "*al-Raḥmān* has taken unto himself a son" (19:88). The Qur'ān calls this a hideous (*idd*) utterance and says that because of it, "the heavens are well nigh rent...and the earth split asunder, and the mountains well nigh fall down crashing for that they have attributed to *al-Raḥmān* a son." In this response, the universe crumbles at the sound of the perceived confession.

Qur'ānic Commentary

The Islamic interpretive tradition has devoted considerable discussion to all aspects of the portrait of Jesus in the Qur'ān. In some cases commentators have added extra details to the Qur'ānic narratives, perhaps to satisfy the curiosity of readers related to what the Qur'ān leaves out. For example, at Q 3:39 al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), and other exegetes transmitted the story that Jesus and John (*Yaḥyā*) were first maternal cousins; when John's mother visited Mary, she said, "I feel the child in my womb bowing down in reverence (*sajada*) to the child in your womb." Al-Qurṭubī

commented, "It is reported that she felt the fetus in her womb bow down with its head turned towards Mary's womb." The exegetes offered this story in an attempt to explain the Qur'ānic expression that John would "confirm a word (*kalima*) from God." Such extra material in the commentaries is often attributed to "the People of the Book" or traditional figures such as Ibn 'Abbās. Commentators did not generally consult the Bible itself for extra details about biblical figures until the Egyptian exegete al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480).

In other cases commentators supplied a narrative framework for disparate materials that otherwise do not give a clue as to context. They speculated about the meaning of obscure expressions in the Jesus verses, sometimes offering a wide variety of exegetical traditions. They also argued concerning possible interpretations of some expressions in the Jesus verses, attempting to bring them in line with other Qur'ānic materials or a general Islamic concept about, for example, the deity of Jesus. In still other cases the commentators ran with explicit denial materials, seeking to accentuate and consolidate Muslim beliefs. The Islamic interpretive tradition on the Qur'ānic Jesus materials is important because, while scripture leaves many questions unanswered, the commentaries tell us what Muslims have understood from scripture, and it is these understandings that have been passed on for more than a millennium.

An established trend in the commentaries is the understanding that the first eighty verses or so of the third *sūra* were recited at the time of the visit of a delegation of Christians from Najrān to Maḍīna. In this narrative, the Christians are said to make a series of confessions related to the deity of Jesus in the presence of Islam's messenger. The messenger then recites the material about Jesus up to the claim at verse 62, "This is the true story." That material includes a statement about the death of Jesus (Q 3:55) and the deity of Jesus (3:59).

The *Tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), the earliest extant complete commentary, offered the story of the Najrān delegation in his interpretation of Q 3:59. Already in his explanations at the beginning of *sūra* 3, however, Muqātil indicated what he perceived to be the Christian confession that the recitation was to refute: "Īsā is God." Muqātil's story begins with an interesting question from the Najrān Christians to the messenger of Islam. "O Muḥammad, why do you abuse (*shatama*) and dishonor (*'āba*) our master (*ṣāhib*)." The Christians then press the messenger with arguments for Jesus' divine Sonship. According to Muqātil the messenger responds, "God forbid that he should have a son (*walad*) or that there be a god with him." He also then recites the text of Q 3:59, "The likeness of Īsā with God is as Adam's likeness; he created him of dust, then said to him, 'Be!' and he was."

One of the key issues for Muqātil and other commentators was the authority of the messenger of Islam to pronounce on the identity of Jesus. This is how they understood the scriptural statements "the truth from your Lord" (Q 3:60) and "this is certainly the true narrative (*qaṣaṣ*)" (Q 3:63). The passage itself indicates a polemical encounter in Q 3:61 ("Whoever argues with you after knowledge has come to you..."); it seems to propose a resolution of the disagreement about the identity of Jesus in a ceremony of mutual cursing. At Q 3:64, Muqātil described a behind-the-scene conversation in which the 'Āqib ("Successor") of the Christians counsels his companions to decline the

ceremony. If the messenger of Islam is lying, he reasons, cursing him will not do any good. If the messenger is honest, then God would destroy the liars by the end of the year. Instead, the Najrān Christians settle for terms.

Though technically the words about Jesus are understood by Muslims to be revealed by God for the messenger to recite (“Say,” Q 3:64), commentators like al-Bayḍāwī (d. ca. 685/1286) clearly saw the *sūra* 3 dispute to be between the messenger and the Christians. Al-Bayḍāwī and his predecessor al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) characterized the entire passage as a kind of model of catechetical skill and compelling polemic.

Muqātil and most subsequent commentators then interpreted Q 3:64 as referring to – in their terms – false beliefs of Christians about Jesus. “People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we worship none but God, and that we associate nothing with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God.” Christians were wrong, wrote the commentators, to worship Jesus, to associate him with God, and to take Jesus as Lord. The call to Christians was thus to submit to the Islamic concept of God. In fact, many commentators cross-referenced Q 9:30–1, with its strong expressions of condemnation and its political context. This is quite different from how Q 3:64 has been used in a significant interfaith initiative in recent years.

The discussion of Jesus’ miracles in the commentaries is a good example of an effort to circumscribe the possible implications of the Qur’ānic material and make it conform to widely held Muslim understandings about Jesus. One of the points at issue was that the Qur’ān uses the verb “create” (*khalaqa*) with Jesus as subject: “I create a bird out of clay for you” (Q 3:49; cf. 5:110). Another issue was the repeated expression “by God’s leave” (Q 3:49) or “by my leave” (Q 5:110) interspersed among the reports of other miracles.

The Qur’ānic text clearly states that Jesus creates (*akhluqu*, Q 3:49; *takhluqu*, Q 5:110) a bird from clay. Elsewhere in the Qur’ān, the verb *khalaqa* occurs 171 times in the active voice. Of these occurrences, God is the subject in no fewer than 162 instances. In eight of the remaining nine instances, the verb is used mockingly in relation to false claims for pagan deities or humans. However, the exegetes did not opt to cross-reference or conduct a word study in the case of the two occurrences where Jesus is the subject. Instead, commentators like al-Qurṭubī interpreted *khalaqa* to mean “fashion and measure,” “shape,” or “determine.” Al-Qurṭubī added a story that the bird continued to fly so long as people were looking, but when it vanished from their sight it fell dead. This was, wrote al-Qurṭubī, “in order that the action of the creature might be distinguished from that of the Creator.”

The exegetes offered corresponding explanations of the repeating expressions, “by God’s permission” (Q 3:49) and “by my permission” (Q 5:110). Jesus healed the blind and the leper and gave life to the dead, according to the Qur’ān. The potential difficulty of this affirmation, wrote the modern commentator Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1981) at Q 3:49, is that “credulous people could attribute divinity to one who gives life to dead matter or a dead corpse.” The expression “by God’s permission” is therefore added to prevent such thoughts. Al-Zamakhsharī wrote at Q 3:49 that “by God’s leave” is a rebuttal of any who would attribute deity to Jesus because of what he did. And at Q 5:110 Fakhr

al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) specified that the miracles described in these verses originated in God's power rather than in Jesus' creative power. In all of this discussion of the miracles of Jesus, the exegetes show virtually no awareness of the Christian tradition, whether canonical Gospel accounts, apocryphal writings, or subsequent theological discussion.

Muslim commentary on the verses referring to the death of Jesus has been extensive and fascinating. Most exegetes took the enigmatic expression in Q 4:157, *shubbiha lahum*, in the direction of a narrative about the transference of the appearance of Jesus onto another. Exegetes wrote, evidently from a very early stage, that when Jesus was about to be arrested and taken to be crucified, God saved him by causing another person in the scene to look like Jesus. The authorities then seized the other person instead and crucified him, while Jesus escaped the danger and God "took him up to himself" (Q 4:158). Exegetes suggested a range of possible characters who received the appearance of Jesus, from Simon of Cyrene to Judas. Muqātil, it seems, did not yet know a name to offer so simply called the unfortunate man a spy (*raqīb*) that the Jews had engaged to keep an eye on Jesus.

This "substitution theory," however, was not favored by all commentators. Al-Rāzī devoted extensive discussion to the theory at both Q 3:55 and 4:157 in a series of *ishkāl*, or "ambiguities." His main difficulty was that, should the substitution interpretation be true, people would not be able to trust sense perception. The fundamental principle in all widely transmitted reports, wrote al-Rāzī at Q 3:55, is that the first narrator must report what he clearly perceived with his senses. Christians have reported that they witnessed the death and crucifixion of Jesus. If what is seen and reported by eyewitnesses is said to be subject to erroneous confusion, this will affect widely accepted reports – including even the claims of Islam for its messenger. "Opening the door of this possibility begins with confusion or sophistry and ends with the total negation of the prophethood of all prophets," al-Rāzī concluded.

Al-Rāzī also highlighted the implications of the substitution theory for God's character. He questioned the purpose of God's casting the likeness of Jesus onto an innocent man who was subsequently condemned to death and killed. He reasons that, if the witnesses believed that the substituted man was Jesus while Jesus was taken up to heaven, this would mean that the people were deliberately thrown into confusion and ignorance. "And this," judged al-Rāzī, "is not worthy of the wisdom of God." That it was worthy of God, however, was exactly what many exegetes understood from the verse immediately preceding Q3:55. "And they deceived (*makarū*), and God deceived, and God is the best of deceivers" (Q 3:54). This means, explained Muqātil, that the Jews deceived ʿĪsā in their attempt to kill him, then God deceived the Jews when they killed their spy and associate.

After presenting his objections to the substitution theory in compelling fashion, al-Rāzī in any case affirmed the truth of his understanding of Q 3:55 and 4:157 that Jesus did not die. He explained at Q 3:55, "Since the veracity of Muḥammad in all that he reported has been established by unquestionable miracles, it is impossible that these objections be taken as evidence against the incontrovertible truth of the text."

The apparent connection in Q 9:29–33 between theological error and military domination is also understood and extended by classical commentators such as Ibn Kathīr. Again, al-Rāzī offered some very interesting reflections on how Christians managed to escape the sword for their confession that the Messiah is the son of God (Q 9:30). He wrote that Christians are actually worse unbelievers than “associators” (*mushrikūn*), because associators do not say that their idol is the Creator or God of the universe. “Christians, on the other hand, profess divine incarnation (*ḥulūl*) and merged oneness (*ittiḥād*). This is truly abominable unbelief (*kufṛ qabīḥ jiddan*).” Associators have two choices in Q 9:5, according to al-Rāzī – death or conversion to Islam. Christians deserve the same fate for their beliefs, or even worse, but according to al-Rāzī were given a third choice, *jizya*, on a kind of technicality. Their outward connection to Moses and Jesus, and to the Torah and Gospel, spared them from death. Following al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī describes *jizya* as a kindness from God that Christians don’t actually deserve.

Medieval Trends

The major themes of Muslim–Christian debate during the medieval period included many specifically related to Jesus: the Trinity, incarnation, the Sonship of Jesus, the crucifixion, and redemption. Anti-Christian arguments were very consistent in different kinds of Arabic literature and were based on Qur’ānic statements such as Q 5:72–5 and *sūra* 112. The mood of the writing was polemical.

Muslim scholars from all parts of the Islamic Empire addressed themselves to refute the Christological beliefs of Christianity, among them Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq (d. ca. 247/860), al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), and ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025). Important later polemicists include Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350). These writers portrayed Christian confessions about Jesus as tantamount to *kufṛ* (unbelief, blasphemy) or *shirk* (“associating”). To their minds, they were targeting orthodox Christian beliefs and practices rather than heretical views. Some described in some detail the understandings they had heard from Christians. They dealt with doctrines like incarnation on a rationalistic basis and described the implications of Christian belief in order to argue for its absurdity.

One well-known work by al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) or Pseudo al-Ghazālī, “The fitting refutation of the deity of Jesus through the evidence of the Gospel” (Massignon 1932), followed a less-trodden path to make a similar point. Acknowledging that the Gospel accounts speak of Jesus as the Son of God, the writer argued that the use of Son of God in those passages is figurative. The writer processed the Gospel texts through an interesting hermeneutical grid: if such passages were opposed to reason or seemed to resist a rational explanation, they should be interpreted through *ta’wīl*, that is, metaphorically. The writer’s refutation of the Christian belief in the deity of Jesus rested on giving metaphorical interpretations to many passages from the Gospel accounts which either clearly present or strongly imply the deity of Jesus.

Christian Backgrounds

Many academic scholars from an earlier period sought to account for the material on Jesus in the Qurʾān by either finding Christian groups in the Middle East during the seventh century whose beliefs the Qurʾān supposedly echoes, or explaining Qurʾānic material as opposing beliefs of heretical Christian groups. More recent scholarship, especially in the last forty years, has proposed a more complex relationship between the contents of the Qurʾān and its Middle Eastern context. Discussions of Christian backgrounds to the Qurʾānic material must include the witness of early monuments such as the Dome of the Rock, and the discussions in early Christian–Muslim “dialogues” that purport to come from the early centuries of Islam.

Some scholars have suggested that the Qurʾān’s teaching that Jesus did not die may have come from Docetist beliefs. Others have found a similarity between the low Christology of the Qurʾān and the beliefs of the Ebionites. Scholars have variously claimed the influence of Monophysites and Nestorians, Tritheists and Monothelites. All the speculation has until now proven inconclusive, however, because there is no version or brand of Christianity that held the Qurʾān’s particular *set* of beliefs about Jesus.

The evidence of early Christian–Muslim dialogues – the dating of which is often disputed – is that the Muslim antagonists perceived the Qurʾānic material on Jesus to address orthodox Christian beliefs and practices. The dialogue attributed to the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy, the correspondence attributed to the Byzantine emperor Leo III and the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar II, and the “Apology” of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 215/830), among similar works, all concern disputes about the identity of Jesus according to common Qurʾānic and biblical understandings. Muslim participants launched their claims or refutations from passages like Q 4:157, 4:171, and 5:72–7. The exchange of views typically focused on the death of Jesus, the deity of Jesus and his divine Sonship, the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the extent to which the Qurʾānic “word” (*kalima*, Q 3:39, 3:45, 4:171) could be brought into line with the Gospel affirmation, “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1).

The Dome of the Rock inscriptions suggest that some of the Qurʾānic materials on Jesus, at least, arose amid a clash of religious claims between emerging Islam and the People of the Book. As described above, the Dome inscriptions offer possibly the earliest written indication of the beliefs of the emerging faith. Jerusalem, at the time of the construction of the Dome, was a city populated by Christians. The inscriptions mention the name of ʾĪsā three times amid substantial anti-Sonship and anti-associate passages. Interspersed in these denials is the name Muḥammad, five times on the Outer Face of the galleries, once on the Inner Face, once over the East Door, and three times over the North Door. The basic claim for Muḥammad is that he is the messenger of God (five times in the Dome inscriptions). However, the inscriptions also repeat the claim after three occurrences of Muḥammad, “God and his angels pray upon (or “for,” *ṣalā ʿalā*) the prophet,” as well as the command, “O you who believe, pray upon him and salute.” They also add the prayer “May God give him intercession” in a short form above the Outer Face of the gallery and in a more elaborate form over the East Door. Above the North Door, most of the text is about Muḥammad, including, “Muḥammad is the servant of

God and his envoy, whom he sent with guidance and the religion of truth to proclaim it over all religions, even though the associators hate it. Let us believe in God and what was revealed to Muḥammad.” The inscriptions above the inner gallery also declare, “The religion of God is Islam.” Intertwined with this claim of religious supersession are apparent expressions of a change of political domination. Above the East Door is written, “You give sovereignty (*mulk*) to whom you will, and withdraw sovereignty from whom you will.”

This pattern may not be readily recognizable from the Qurʾān because of the sparse occurrence of the name Muḥammad there. However, passages such as Q 9:29–33 condemn perceived confessions about Jesus in the midst of affirmations about God’s messenger and the religion of truth (Q 9:29, 33). Similarly, the strong expression against the deity of Jesus in Q 5:17 is bracketed by the exhortation, “O People of the Book! Now has our messenger come unto you explaining to you...” (Q 5:15, 19). And *sūra* 33, which contains one of the four Qurʾānic mentions of Muḥammad (Q 33:40), presents the claim and accompanying command, “God and his angels pray upon the prophet. O you who believe: Pray upon him and salute!” (Q 33:56). Interestingly, the expression in the Dome inscriptions, “You give sovereignty to whom you will, and withdraw sovereignty from whom you will,” is extended in Q 3:26 with, “you exalt whom you will and abase whom you will.” These indications suggest that a key issue with the identity of Jesus, at least in parts of the Qurʾān, was the authority of Muḥammad.

Contemporary Discussions

The main trend in modern Muslim polemic and Qurʾān commentary is to affirm the truth of the Qurʾān in all its statements about Jesus. Wherever there is a clash of claims for the identity of Jesus between the Qurʾān and the New Testament, the general impulse of many Muslim thinkers continues to be to accuse the New Testament of corruption or falsification. A story about Paul distorting the allegedly Islamic origins of Christianity continues to be used. And some Muslim polemicists continue to put forward the spurious *Gospel of Barnabas*, a medieval Islamic forgery, as the authentic account of Jesus in contradiction to the canonical Gospel accounts. However, not all Muslim statements about Jesus take the disagreement in the same direction.

One discussion that may be taken as a sign of the persistence of medieval themes is the discussion of the name given for Jesus in the Qurʾān, *ʿĪsā*. From an etymological perspective, scholar James Bellamy wrote that *ʿĪsā* is a mistake in the Qurʾān, a corruption and misreading of the Arabic *Masīḥ* (“Messiah”). However, in an extensive discussion in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Neal Robinson presented the many possible verdicts on the Qurʾānic name and stated, “[i]t is just possible that *ʿĪsā* was actually Jesus’ original name” (Robinson 2003).

A modern initiative that showed an interesting Muslim approach to Jesus was a public letter from Muslim leaders posted to the Internet October 13, 2007, known as “A Common Word between Us and You” (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought 2007). The letter proposed that Christians and Muslims have something “in common”

in the theme of loving God and loving one's neighbor, and drew the language of "a common word" from Q 3:64. In making its case, the statement quoted in a straightforward way from Jesus' words in Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:29–31: "In the New Testament, Jesus Christ said: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'...." The willingness to quote from the New Testament in a positive way, and to say that these words are the words of Jesus, remains a rarity in Muslim–Christian discourse.

And yet, such is the ambiguity of interfaith dialogue that even in this case, the intent may not be clear. Quoting Jesus as affirming the oneness of God and commanding love to God could be seen as a way of highlighting an important (and traditionally polemical) Muslim theme. Further, using Q 3:64 to mean to say that Muslims and Christians share beliefs "in common," in contrast to the understanding of Q 3:64 in Muslim commentary and polemic for 1,200 years, raises questions about the strength of the scriptural foundation of the letter. A comparable interfaith event documented in the 1979 collection, *We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam*, began with a kind of full stop. Yes, we can talk together about God, said Smail Balić. However, do not bring Jesus into the discussion, Balić instructed, because in Islamic terms Jesus has nothing to do with theology (Balić 1979: 1).

The majority of modern Muslim writing on Jesus, in fact, continues to be polemical. The influential work *Izhār al-ḥaqq*, by Indian theologian Raḥmat Allāh Kayrānwī, circulates widely in South Asia more than 150 years after its publication in 1864. The work mounts a major attack on the Trinity and the deity of Jesus, in addition to accusing the Bible of corruption. The *Izhār* has become a sourcebook of polemic for several generations of Muslim writers and speakers, from print and video cassette to websites and YouTube. Prominent polemicists who have followed in this tradition include South Africa's Ahmed Deedat (d. 2005), Canada's Shabbir Ali, and India's Zakir Naik.

A significant indicator of modern Muslim thinking about Jesus in an age of Islamist militancy is the writing of Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) in his Qurʾān commentary, *Fī zilāl al-Qurʾān*. At the beginning of his commentary on the first part of the third *sūra*, for example, Quṭb connected what he took to be the errors of Christian belief about Jesus with the political and military struggles between Muslims and the People of the Book. He saw the first step in the attack of the enemies of Islam to be their effort to shake the faith of the Muslims. He wrote that this battle continues up to the present, and that the enemies are the same "unbelievers and rejecters: international Zionism and international crusadism" (Ayoub 1992: 6). It is interesting that in his widely read *Milestones*, Quṭb interpreted Q 3:64 not as an interfaith statement about beliefs held in common, but rather as a call to *jihād*.

Quṭb again discussed the Qurʾānic portrait of Jesus at Q 9:29–34. Quṭb followed the medieval trend of a strong attack on non-Muslim beliefs alongside exclusive claims for the truth of Islam. Striking in Quṭb's interpretations – though not entirely disconnected from medieval commentary – is his readiness to link perceived false confessions about Jesus with Islamist violence. He asserts at Q 9:29 that Christian belief in the deity of Jesus represents an attack on the deity of God, and thus an attack on Muslims. The battle has already been initiated from the Christian side by these false beliefs, according to Quṭb, therefore *jihād* is a natural and appropriate response. The style of *Fī zilāl* is

attractive to many Muslims and ensures that the commentary continues to have a wide circulation and extensive influence.

When it comes to their understanding of the Qur'ānic materials on Jesus, it is interesting to speculate about what Muslims will emphasize in the future. Will a new generation be attracted by the polite conventions of interfaith dialogue or by the uncompromising assertions of Islam exegesis? Or will a new approach possibly emerge? Will the Qur'ānic material on ʿĪsā someday be allowed to interact with the biblical portrait of Jesus, or will the two views simply continue forward on parallel tracks?

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CHAPTER 19

Biblical Background

Gabriel Said Reynolds

Scholars of the Qurʾān have long been divided over its relationship to the Bible and biblical literature more generally. This division emerges in part from the nature of the biblical material in the Qurʾān. On the one hand the Qurʾān is a text marked substantially by biblical characters and narratives. On the other hand, the Qurʾān rarely cites biblical passages and frequently departs from the details of biblical narratives. Traditionally most academic scholars have sought to explain these departures as products of the particular context in which Muḥammad would have encountered biblical material, whether in written or oral form. These scholars often argue that Muḥammad was exposed to certain sorts of biblical material (canonical or otherwise) because of the particular sectarian background of the Jews or Christians whom he met. Other academic scholars, however, have sought to explain the nature of the biblical references in the text of the Islamic scripture as products of the Qurʾān's intentional reshaping of biblical material for the sake of its own religious message.

The Biblical Material in the Qurʾān

The presentation of biblical characters in the Qurʾān is shaped by the Qurʾānic idea that God's principal method of communication with the world is through – in addition to angels – prophets (who might be named with the Arabic term *nabīy* or *rasūl*, or both). Most biblical figures who appear in the Qurʾān, whether or not they are named prophets in the Bible, do so as prophets. Therefore they generally share certain characteristics: they are chosen by God (and usually sent to their own people), they provoke divisions

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among their people between believers and unbelievers, they give warnings of divine punishment (and sometimes promises of divine blessing), and they insist on the worship of God alone. They are also concerned to prove their own claim to prophethood in the midst of skeptical opponents. The Qurʾān thus reduces the diversity of biblical narratives so that most of its protagonists have a similar profile.

Since it is impossible in a chapter of modest length to discuss all of the biblical material in the Qurʾān, I will discuss only the most prominent biblical characters and themes therein. Thereafter I address certain questions concerning the nature of the biblical material in the Qurʾān which have been at the center of academic debates.

Adam and Eve

One biblical protagonist who never receives the title of prophet in the Qurʾān is Adam (although he is given this title by later Islamic tradition). In the Qurʾān God creates Adam as a *khalīfa*, or “vicegerent” on earth (Q 2:30) and teaches him the names of things (Q 2:31–3). In seven different *sūras* the Qurʾān refers to a story – prominent in Christian texts such as the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* – which has God command the angels to bow down before Adam (Q 2:34; 7:11; 15:28–31; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; 38:71–4). All of the angels do so with the exception of the devil (Iblīs), who explains (as in the *Cave of Treasures*) that it would be inappropriate for him, who was created by fire, to bow down to Adam, who was created from dirt. For this offense the devil is expelled from heaven and declared to be *raḥīm* (an “outcast” and not “stoned” as sometimes understood).

In the Garden the devil – now referred to as Satan (*al-Shayṭān*) – again meets Adam (now accompanied by his “wife”). Adam, prompted by Satan, eats from the forbidden tree (Q 2:35; 7:19–22; 20:120). This tree is not named “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” as in Genesis 2:17, but rather the “tree of eternity (*khuld*)” (Q 20:120). Both Adam and his “wife” (left unnamed by the Qurʾān) are expelled from the Garden, along with Satan (2:36, 7:24, 20:123).

Of these episodes only the story of Adam’s sin in (and expulsion from) the Garden is shared by Genesis. In its material on Adam the Qurʾān follows largely later writings. The presence of Satan in the Garden reflects the Christian interpretation of the serpent in the Genesis story as a manifestation of the devil (cf. Revelation 12:9). The angelic opposition to the creation of Adam in Q 2:30 is found in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b).

Cain and Abel

The Qurʾān refers to Cain and Abel not by name but as “Adam’s two sons” (Q 5:27–31). The Qurʾān’s references to them preserves the basic outline of the narrative of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 but shows the influence of Christian sources (in particular the Syriac *Life of Abel*) which make Abel an anticipation of Christ (note especially Q 5:28, in which Abel offers himself as a victim). Following the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5), the

Qur'ān connects the story of Cain's murder of Abel with a divine admonition given to the Israelites, that whoever murders another is guilty of the murder of all mankind, and whoever saves the life of another has the merit of saving all mankind (Q 5:32).

Noah

The Qur'ān shows enormous interest in the story of Noah as an example of divine punishment meted out on unbelievers (this marks a change from the Bible, where the people are condemned for their wickedness, not faithlessness). This story, repeated at length in seven places (Q 7:59–64; 10:71–4; 11:25–49; 23:23–30; 26:105–22; 54:9–17; 71:1–28) and referred to in numerous other passages, illustrates the way in which the Qur'ān takes advantage of biblical material which can be shaped easily to match the preaching of its own prophet, namely that God will destroy – or punish with hellfire – those who do not listen to his word. In three *sūras* (7, 11, and 26) the account of Noah and the flood is the first of a series of punishment stories. On one occasion (Q 7:69) the prophet Hūd, who follows Noah, uses the story of Noah to warn his own people of divine punishment. One might think of the prophet Muḥammad doing the same: the story of the flood is recounted in order that his audience might take the threat that God will punish them seriously.

Of note in regard to Noah is the account of his unnamed son who is drowned in the flood, mentioned only in *sūra* 11 (vv. 42–7). This account, which has no precedent in the account of Genesis, seems to reflect a process of speculation on Ezekiel 14:13–20 (cf. Ezekiel 18:4), a text which insists that if Noah had an unrighteous son he would not be saved from punishment, even death, by the merits of his father. The Qur'ān is interested in this account in order to show that devotion to God is more important than devotion to anyone, even a family member.

Abraham and Lot

The theme of faith over family is central also to the Qur'ānic material on Abraham. As the Qur'ān depicts a division between Noah and his son (and has God [11:46] command Noah not to consider his son part of his family), it also depicts a division between Abraham and his father (Q 6:74–83; 19:41–8; 21:51–67; 26:69–104, 116; 29:16–17, 24–5; 37:83–96; 43:26–7; 60:4). This confrontation, the origins of which are not in the canonical Bible but rather in Midrash and the pseudepigraphic *Apocalypse of Abraham* (first or second century CE), reflects a tradition by which Abraham, who lived in the midst of a pagan people, discovered the one true God in his childhood by observing the heavenly bodies (Q 6:74–83). This discovery leads him to confront his idolatrous father Terah – named Āzar by the Qur'ān (Q 6:74) – and to break his father's idols (Q 21:51–70; 37:88–96). Eventually Abraham's people throw him into a furnace for his insolence, but God preserves him (Q 21:68–70; 29:24–5; 37:97–8; as God preserves Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3).

The Qurʾān refers to Abraham’s migration to a promised land (Genesis 12:1–9; Q 21:71; 29:26) and to his guests (Genesis 18:1–15; Q 11:69–73; 15:51–6; 51:24–34) – presented as angels in the Qurʾān (unlike the men of the Genesis account they do not eat the food presented to them) – who come to give him and his wife the good news of a son (Isaac), and who continue on to destroy Lot’s people (Genesis 19:1–16; 11:77–81; 15:61–6). The Qurʾān also alludes to Abraham’s dispute with God over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:23–33; Q 11:74–6; 29:32). While the Qurʾān discusses God’s commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:1–18; Q 37:100–10; cf. 2:124), it does not specify whether Isaac or Ishmael is the intended sacrifice (eventually Islamic tradition would decide upon Ishmael). The Qurʾān does specify that Abraham and Ishmael together built the foundations of the “house” (2:124–41; 14:25–41), an episode which may be related to Abraham’s building an altar on Mt. Moriah (understand by Jewish and Christian tradition to be the site of Jerusalem) in Genesis 22:9, but which is taken by Islamic tradition as a reference to the building of the Ka’ba.

The Qurʾān’s references to Lot follow much more closely the biblical story, principally that of Genesis 19. The Qurʾān has Lot protect the angels who visit him from his sexually deviant people; it also has Lot reprimand his people explicitly for this deviancy (Q 7:80–1; 11:78–80; 15:66–72; 21:74; 26:165–6; 27:54–5; 29:28–30; 54:37; 69:9), something which reflects the New Testament (2 Peter 2:8–9) more than the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

Joseph

The Qurʾān dedicates a *sūra* (12) almost entirely to an account of the story of Joseph, an account which is generally identified as the longest continual narrative in the Qurʾān (although even then it is marked more by references than detailed descriptions). As Joseph Witztum has shown, the Qurʾānic Joseph account departs from that of Genesis in ways that consistently reflect Syriac Christian homilies. The Qurʾān refers to only one prophetic dream of Joseph (there are two in Genesis). This dream (cf. Genesis 37:9–10) suggests that Joseph’s parents will bow down to Joseph, and they do so towards the end of the account (Q 12:99–101); in Genesis it is the brothers who do so (indeed his mother Rachel is already dead). Reflecting a development found already in the Syriac *Homilies on Joseph* of Pseudo-Narsai, the Qurʾān has Joseph’s father Jacob warn Joseph not to tell his brothers about this dream. Again in line with Syriac tradition, it has the brothers claim (12:13) that a wolf (not a “wild animal” as in Genesis) devoured Joseph. The Qurʾān also has Jacob recognize that the brothers’ claim is a lie, something also reported in Pseudo-Narsai.

To the Joseph story the Qurʾān adds an account (12:30–5), found in various post-Qurʾānic Midrashic sources (which may be based on pre-Qurʾānic traditions), by which the wife of Potiphar (or *al-ʿAzīz*, as he is called in the Qurʾān) gathers the women of Egypt to witness the beauty of Joseph. It also (12:50–3) has her confess her wrongdoing with Joseph, a detail found in Ephrem’s (d. 373) *Commentary on Genesis*. Various details of the interaction between the brothers and Joseph after his ascent to power are also

found in Syriac Christian tradition, including the declaration of the brothers (12:75) that the one in whose bag the goblet is found shall be enslaved. The Qur'ānic report that Jacob was blind, and recovered his sight through the touch of Joseph's garment (Q 12:93–6), reflects an exegetical development on Genesis 45:27, which speaks of Jacob's spirit "reviving" upon seeing the wagons which Joseph had sent from Egypt. The consistent departures from Genesis in the Joseph story illustrate that the Qur'ān is more in conversation with biblical tradition – and Syriac Christian tradition in particular – than it is with the Bible.

Moses and Aaron

The name Moses appears more than any other in the Qur'ān (136 times). The Qur'ān's remarkable interest in the figure of Moses presumably reflects a sectarian milieu in which the figure of Moses was central (one might note to this effect Q 6:91, which reports that the prophet's opponents "displayed parchments of Moses' book").

The material on Moses in the Qur'ān might be divided generally between that which has him act as a messenger, or warner, to Pharaoh and thus is connected to the other "punishment stories" of the Qur'ān, and that which is concerned with the revelation of a covenant between God and the Israelites for which Moses acted as a mediator. As for Moses' mission to Pharaoh, the Qur'ān introduces the confrontation between the two figures by reflecting in several places (Q 20:37–40; 26:18–29; 28:7–28) on the childhood of Moses. It seems to have Pharaoh himself (described in 20:39 as an "enemy" of God), through the urging of his wife (Q 28:9), adopt Moses (unlike Exodus 2, which has Pharaoh's daughter do so). The Qur'ān depicts the adoption as part of God's foreordained plan to make Moses "an enemy and a cause of grief" (28:8) to Pharaoh. It also makes the subsequent confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh (Q 26:10–17) into another example of a prophet choosing faith over family (to make this happen the Qur'ān makes the Pharaoh of Moses' childhood the same Pharaoh of his adulthood, *pace* Exodus 4:19).

The Qur'ān reports Moses' killing of an Egyptian (20:40; 26:19–20; 28:15, 33), but it has Moses (28:15) blame this on Satan. The Qur'ān also reports Moses' sojourn in Midian (20:40; 28:22–35) where he encounters God in a burning bush (20:9–16; 27:7–12; 28:29–35) and is assigned Aaron as a helper (20:25–32; 25:35; 26:12–14; 28:34). However, whereas the account in Exodus is centered on Moses' mission to save the Israelites from their suffering in Egypt, the Qur'ān seems to have Moses sent to Egypt principally to reprimand Pharaoh and the Egyptians for their insolence or disobedience (Q 20:24; 27:12).

Accordingly the Qur'ān makes the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh less about the liberation of the Israelites (although this is mentioned, Q 20:40; 26:64; 28:21, 25; 37:115) and more about the punishment of Pharaoh, the enemy of God who claims to be divine (26:29; 28:38; 79:22–4). Indeed the Qur'ān seems to make Pharaoh the unbeliever *par excellence*, by having him witness divine signs (nine of them, according to Q 17:101; 27:12) – including the miracle of Moses' staff and the

transformation of his hand, and various plagues (Q 7:130–4) – and attribute them to magic, even though his own sorcerers come to recognize the divine origin of these signs (Q 7:120–6; 20:70–3; 26:46–51). The Qurʾān alludes in several places to the ultimate destruction of all of Pharaoh’s people (2:50; 25:35–8; 54:41–2), or perhaps only his soldiers (Q 10:90; 20:78; 28:40). In one place it reports that Pharaoh came to believe in God; his faith *in extremis* was of no use to him, but his body was saved as a sign (10:90–2).

The Qurʾān alludes to several biblical episodes of the wandering of the Israelites in the desert. It refers to God’s sending manna and quails to the Israelites in the wilderness (Q 2:57; 7:160; 20:80–1; Exodus 16; Numbers 11) and to Moses’ striking of a rock to make water spring forth (Q 2:60; 7:160; Exodus 17:5–6). The revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai (referred to by name, in two different forms, in Q 23:20 and 95:2, and elsewhere simply as “the mountain” – *al-tūr*) is of great importance to the Qurʾān. On numerous occasions the Qurʾān alludes to God’s meeting with Moses there (Q 2:253; 4:164; 7:143–4; 19:52; 20:11–24, 83–4; 26:10–16; 27:8–11; 28:30–5, 46; 79:16–19), and to a general covenant there between God and Israel (Q 2:40, 47–8, 63, 80, 83–4, 93, 100, 122–3, *passim*). The Qurʾān has God condemn the Israelites for worshiping the Golden Calf in Moses’ absence (Q 2:51–4, 92–3; 4:153; 7:142, 148–52; 20:83–98; Exodus 32; Deuteronomy 9:16; Nehemiah 9:18); in one place (20:95–7) it blames a character named al-Sāmirī for this sin and refers to the scattering of the ashes of the calf in water, which the Israelites drink (Exodus 32:20). The Israelites are repeatedly blamed in the Qurʾān for their breaking of this covenant (Q 2:27, 83, 93, 100; 7:102; 8:56; 13:2, 25; 16:91–5), one of several sins which has led God to curse them (Q 2:88; 4:46; 5:13, 60, 64; 17:60).

Saul, David, and Solomon

The Qurʾān refers to Saul only in one place (2:246–50) and there as Ṭālūt, a name related to the Arabic root (*t-w-l*) suggesting height (cf. 1 Samuel 9:2). In this passage the Qurʾān refers to God’s presence (*sakīna*, cf. Hebrew *shekinah*) residing in the ark (2:248) and to an episode from the story of Gideon and his army (Judges 7:1–7), but with Saul in the place of Gideon (2:249). The Qurʾān connects that episode with the conflict in 1 Samuel 17 between the Israelites and the Philistines, as it speaks there of Saul’s forces entering into battle against Goliath and refers to David’s killing of him (Q 2:251).

Elsewhere the Qurʾān, following Jewish and Christian tradition, associates David with the Psalms (*zabūr*; 4:163; 17:55) – presenting the Psalms, like the “Torah (*tawrāt*)” and “Gospel (*injīl*),” as a book given by God to a prophet. The traditional Jewish and Christian association of David with the Psalms also seems to be reflected in those passages which speak of David’s praising of God (21:79; 34:4, 10; 38:18). The Qurʾān also, along with Psalm 148 (see vv. 7–10), speaks of the mountains’ and the birds’ praising God with David (21:79; 34:10; 38:18–19). Otherwise the Qurʾān is interested in David asking. It refers to him (38:26) as *khalīfa* (“successor” or “vicegerent,” whence “caliph”).

David is the only figure in the Qurʾān other than Adam (Q 2:30) to receive this title. Also like Adam he is not named a prophet (*nabīy*) or a messenger (*rasūl*). It could be that the Qurʾān conceives of both Adam and David in a distinct way, as rulers of their people, or of creation, and not as messengers to them.

The Qurʾān also alludes to a sin of David, in a passage (Q 38:21–6) which seems to make the parable told by the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12) of two men, one with many sheep and one with only a single sheep (a parable which alludes to David's stealing of Bathsheba from Uriah), into a dispute between men who really had a dispute over sheep. At the same time the Qurʾān speaks of David's repentance (38:24) and God's forgiveness (38:25) – a passage which would have a great effect on Islamic spirituality – suggesting that its author knew of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his plotting against the life of Uriah.

On occasion the Qurʾān connects the life of David with that of his son Solomon. Together David and Solomon are said to have exhibited judgment (21:78) in a case involving sheep (again) in a field (perhaps related to Genesis 13:7–12) and to have received knowledge from God (27:15). Like David, Solomon is said to have repented (Q 38:34), although the Qurʾān does not name his sin. On the other hand Solomon is distinguished by possession of certain supernatural powers. He has power over the winds (21:81–2; 34:12–13; 38:36–9) and over the *jinn* (27:16–17; 34:12–13; 38:37). The Qurʾān describes Solomon's encounter with a troop of ants in an episode related to a report in the Babylonian Talmud (*Hullin* 57b) which explains Proverbs 6:6–8. It reports both the speech of the ants, who are afraid of being crushed by Solomon's armies, and Solomon's ability to understand them (Q 27:18–19).

In its description of Solomon's encounter with the Queen of Sheba (27:20–44; 34:15–19) the Qurʾān is in close conversation with a long passage in the *Targum Sheni* of Esther (a Jewish text the earliest form of which may date to the fourth century CE). Like the *Targum Sheni* the Qurʾān speaks of Solomon's power over animals and various spiritual beings. In 27:20 ff. the Qurʾān, following the *Targum Sheni*, refers to one bird, the hoopoe (*hudhud*), who comes to Solomon to give him a report of the Queen of Sheba's reign. Similarly it follows the *Targum Sheni* in its description of the encounter between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, ending in the conversion of the queen (Q 27:44).

Jonah

Of all of the Major and Minor prophets of the Bible the Qurʾān shows substantial interest only in the figure of Jonah. It alludes to the story of the repentance and salvation of Nineveh, and suggests that of all peoples threatened with divine punishment the people of this city alone turned to God and were saved: "Why has there not been any town except the people of Jonah that might believe, so that its belief might benefit it?" (10:98). In its allusions to Jonah (6:86; 10:98–9; 21:87–8; 37:139–48; 68:48–50) the Qurʾān seems to follow the biblical narrative closely, although the way it refers to

Jonah (“the man of the fish”) leaving somewhere in anger (21:87; an allusion to his leaving for Jaffa in Jonah 1:3) led most Muslim interpreters to imagine that he first preached in Nineveh and, after leaving the city in frustration because the people did not hear his message (or that God did not destroy them), was subsequently swallowed by the great fish (and then returned a second time to preach to Nineveh, this time successfully).

John, Zechariah, and Mary

In *sūra* 3 the Qurʾān connects closely the story of John (John the Baptist of the New Testament) and the story of Mary. The Qurʾān first (3:35–6) describes (following the *Protoevangelium of James*, a second-century CE Greek text centered on the events before the birth of Christ) how the mother of Mary – Anne of Christian tradition and the “wife of ʿImrān” in the Qurʾān – dedicates her child to God. While the Qurʾān does not explain this, she does so because, as with the Old Testament figure of Hannah/Anne, she had previously been barren. The Qurʾān then describes how the child, Mary, is brought to the care of Zechariah in the temple (Ar. *miḥrāb*). As Mary is a child miraculously given to Anne, John is a child miraculously given to Zechariah. When Zechariah prays to God for a child (Q 3:38) he is promised John (Q 3:39) even though he is old and his wife is barren (Q 3:40). The Qurʾān also alludes to the report in Luke (1:20–2) that Zechariah was not able to speak (the Qurʾān, 19:10, specifies that he remained mute for three days).

In *sūra* 19, on the other hand, the Qurʾān connects the story of John more closely with Jesus. Here the Qurʾān describes the divine annunciation of John to Zechariah (19:7–10) in a manner close to its description of the angelic annunciation of Jesus to Mary (19:17–21). In the same way that it has God call down peace upon John (Q 19:15), it has Jesus – speaking miraculously as an infant – call down peace upon himself (Q 19:33). Otherwise the Qurʾān describes John (19:12–15) in terms similar to those of Jesus (19:30–2), alluding even to John’s spiritual authority, like Jesus, as a child (19:12), in a way which smacks of early Christian traditions on the childhoods of John and Jesus. However, the only allusion in the Qurʾān to John’s predictions of the coming of Jesus is in *sūra* 3 (3:39).

As for the Qurʾānic portrait of Mary, it seems to be shaped by a desire of the Qurʾān’s author to protect her reputation in the face of Jewish calumny (noted in Q 4:156). The manner in which Mary’s mother asks for God’s protection of Mary and Jesus from Satan (3:36) may even allude to the sinlessness of Mary and Jesus (a widespread report in later Islamic literature, doubtlessly inspired by this verse, describes how Satan has touched all children at their birth except for Mary and Jesus). The Qurʾān’s interest in the tradition found in the *Protoevangelium of James* regarding Mary’s upbringing in the temple, where even the food she receives comes directly from heaven (3:37; *Protoevangelium* 8.1), illustrates its desire to emphasize Mary’s purity (on this note 3:42: “Allāh has chosen you and purified you, and He has chosen you above the world’s women”).

Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Qur'ān 23:50 refers to God's giving Mary and Jesus refuge on a height with "flowing water," perhaps a reference to their protection during the holy family's flight to Egypt (cf. the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* 20:1–2), if not a reference to the nativity of Jesus (cf. Q 19:22–5). This is not the only passage in which the Qur'ān seems to give a special status to Mary and Jesus. As mentioned above, the Qur'ān has Mary's mother commend Mary and her offspring (that is, from the Qur'ān's perspective, only Jesus) to the protection of God against Satan (Q 3:36). In a passage which alludes to the annunciation the Qur'ān reports that God has made Mary, and her son, signs for the world (21:91; cf. 23:50). In that verse the Qur'ān relates that Jesus was conceived when God breathed his Spirit into Mary. The importance of this seems to be confirmed by 4:171, where the Qur'ān calls Jesus both "God's word cast into Mary" (cf. Q 3:39, 45) and a "spirit from [God]." In addition Jesus is the only prophet associated with the Holy Spirit (or "spirit of holiness") in the Qur'ān. On three occasions (2:87, 253; 5:110) the Qur'ān reports that God "strengthened Jesus" with the Holy Spirit.

Scholars such as Wilhelm Rudolph have seen a particular reflection of Christian doctrine in the way the Qur'ān suggests that the Spirit comes down from God's "command" (*amr*, a word related to Aramaic, *mēmṛā*, used for the Word of God; see Q 17:85; cf. 16:2; 40:15; 42:52; 97:4). The Qur'ān also sees a role for the Spirit (16:102) in the transmission of revelation to Muḥammad.

Jesus (like John) is a prophet from his youth, apparently from the moment of his birth. The Qur'ān in fact insists that he could speak "in the cradle" (3:45; 19:29 ff.). Indeed some interpreters attribute the address beginning in 19:24 to Jesus when he was still in the womb. One might conclude that Jesus is more than a divine messenger; he does not simply receive the word of God, he is inspired in his very being, having been created by the spirit of God. Thus he is rightly called the word and spirit of God. At the same time, the Qur'ān, rejecting the idea of God as father, also denies the title "son of God" to Jesus (Q 9:30). Indeed the Qur'ān sharply critiques Christian doctrine on Christ, accusing the Christians of unbelief for considering God to be Jesus (Q 5:72; a locution which is probably an intentional caricature of Christian doctrine) and to be the "third of three" (Q 5:73). It also has Jesus distance himself from those who claim that both Jesus and Mary are "gods" (Q 5:116; presumably another caricature of Christian doctrine and not, as some Orientalists have argued, a reflection of a Mary-worshipping cult in Arabia).

The Qur'ān attributes a number of miracles to Jesus. Jesus brings a bird which he forms from clay to life (a miracle also associated with the childhood of Jesus in the second-century CE *Childhood of the Savior* or *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*), heals the blind and leper, raises the dead (all mentioned in Q 3:49 and Q 5:110), and knows things which are hidden (3:49). The Israelites, according to the Qur'ān, attributed Jesus' ability to work these miracles to magic (Q 5:110; 61:6), an accusation known from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 107b; Sotah 47a).

The Qur'ān also relates an account by which Jesus calls down a table (*mā'ida*) from heaven (5:112–15) upon a challenge from the disciples. This account is not a version of the "multiplication of fish and loaves" account of the Gospels, or the Last Supper

narrative (or the “sheet from heaven” in Acts 10:9–16), but rather a tradition which reflects Psalm 78 and the Bread of Life pericope in John 6, in which the crowds challenge Jesus to produce a sign like the manna Moses once brought down from heaven (John 6:30–1). The challenge of the disciples in Q 5:112 – “Can your Lord send down to us a table (*māʾida*) from the sky?” – echoes Psalm 78:19 – “Can God spread a table (in Ethiopic: *māʾedd*) in the desert?”

The Qurʾān uses the term *ḥawāriyyūn* to refer to the disciples, a term (like *māʾida*) which comes from Ethiopic (*ḥawāryā*: “walker” or “disciple”). Because this term seems to be related to the word “white” in Arabic, many Muslim interpreters imagine that all of Jesus’ disciples were bleachers of cloth, or that they all wore white (the translator Muhammad Asad wonders if they might have been part of the Essene community, which is sometimes thought to have worn white).

The standard position of Muslim interpreters, as well as academic scholars, is that the Qurʾān denies the crucifixion of Jesus in 4:157 where it declares: “[the Israelites] did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but so it was made to appear to them (*shubbiha la-hum*).” This verse, however, only denies that the Israelites killed Jesus. This denial seems to be consistent with other verses (esp. Q 3:55; 5:117) which suggest that it was God who took Jesus’ soul (“caused him to die,” Ar. *tawaffi*). Yet if the Qurʾān itself seems to accept the death of Jesus, it does not attribute any particular sacrificial or redemptive quality to that death. It does, on the other hand, seem to follow Christian doctrine on the return of Christ in the last days. It speaks of Christ as a sign of the Hour (Q 43:61) and makes him a witness against Jews and Christians on the Day of Resurrection (Q 4:159). These references (along with the doctrine that Jesus escaped death) led to the development of detailed narratives on the apocalyptic role of Jesus as an instrument of divine vengeance in later Islamic traditions.

Other Biblical Material in the Qurʾān

While the Qurʾān rejects Christian doctrine on Jesus it embraces certain elements of anti-Jewish polemic which are prominent in early Christian (especially Syriac) literature. This is seen most prominently in the repeated accusation that the Jews are “killers of the prophets” (2:61, 87, 91; 3:21, 112, 181, 183; 4:155; 5:70). This accusation does not reflect the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, which includes only two brief reports of insignificant prophets being killed (2 Chronicles 24:20–1; Jeremiah 26:20–3; cf. 1 Kings 19:9–10). Instead it reflects the portrayal of the Israelites in the New Testament (esp. Matthew 23:34–48/Luke 13:34–5, but also Hebrews 11:32–40) and early Christian literature (esp. the *Lives of the Prophets* attributed to Epiphanius [d. 403], the Syriac version of which dates to the sixth century CE). The Qurʾān also speaks of God’s cursing of the Israelites, and insists in one place that David and Jesus also cursed them (5:78; cf. 2:88; 4:46, 5:13, 60, 64; 17:60).

Some of the Qurʾān’s eschatological imagery, especially its reference to a beast (27:82; Revelation 13:11) and a trumpet blast (6:73; 18:99; 20:102; 23:101; 27:87; 36:51; 39:68; 50:20; 69:13; 74:8; 78:18; Matthew 23:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1

Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 8:7–11:15), reflects New Testament imagery. The Qurʾān's portrayal of heaven and hell also seems to reflect a Christian perspective, especially that of the Syriac fathers. Like the *Hymns on Paradise* of Ephrem, the Qurʾān presents heaven as a garden, and indeed as the Garden of Eden (2:25; 9:72; 13:23; 16:31; 18:31; 19:61; 20:76; 35:33; 38:50; 40:8; 61:12; 98:8; cf. Revelation 2:7) which lies at the top of a cosmic mountain in the heavenly realm.

The Qurʾān follows the Bible in describing God's creation of the world in six days (7:54; 10:3; 11:7; 25:59; 41:9–12; 50:38; 57:4), although it seems to refute the tradition of God's resting on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2) by insisting that God does not tire from the act of creation (46:33, 50:38); other passages suggest that in place of resting on the seventh day God sat down on the divine throne (7:54; 10:3; 13:2; 20:5; 25:59; 32:4; 57:4). Reflecting the account of the creation of Adam in Genesis 2, the Qurʾān regularly speaks of the creation of man from clay, or dirt (3:59; 6:2; 7:12; 15:26–7; 23:12; 32:7; 37:11; 38:71, 76), although in some places it speaks of creation from water (21:30; 24:45; 25:54), something which may reflect ultimately 2 Peter 3:5.

The Qurʾān also speaks repeatedly of Allāh's ability to coin parables (2:26; 13:17; 14:24–5, 45; 16:74–6, *passim*), which may be seen as a response to the centrality of the parable in the preaching of Jesus in the Gospels.

Biblical Material not Mentioned by the Qurʾān

In an attempt to understand the Qurʾān's relationship to the Bible it is also instructive to note the significant biblical elements which are left unmentioned by the Qurʾān. With the exception of the material on Saul, David, and Solomon (and brief mentions of Elijah - 6:85, 37:123–32 – and Elisha - 6:86, 38:48 – and a curious accusation that the Jews consider Ezra to be the son of God - 9:30), the Qurʾān shows little interest in the biblical narrative of the conquest of the promised land, the rise and fall of the Israelite monarchy, and the return of the Israelites from exile. The Qurʾān shows no significant interest in the major and minor prophets, excepting Jonah. It is also worth noting that the Qurʾān makes no explicit mention of the Mishna or Torah, although in one place (5:32) it introduces a quotation from the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5) with the words: "We decreed for the Children of Israel...."

The Qurʾānic references to the New Testament are exclusively to the Gospels, and even then are limited to only a few characters: Zechariah, John, Mary, and Jesus. The Qurʾān shows no particular knowledge (with the possible exception of eschatological imagery) of the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline or catholic epistles, or the Book of Revelation (but on this book see Brady 1978). The way in which the Qurʾān passes over most of the New Testament is parallel to the way it passes over the Mishna and the Talmud: the Qurʾān is not interested in, or aware of, the idea of scripture among the Jews and Christians of its time. It is interested in certain biblical characters which it finds useful for the advancement of its own message centered on a God who sends prophets, often with signs, to remind humans to worship and obey Him alone. Thus one might say that the Qurʾān is not interested in the Bible *per se*, or in the biblical account of the history of salvation.

Knowledge of the Canonical Bible

These observations leave one with the question of what the author(s) of the Qurʾān knew of the canonical Bible, and the larger question of how biblical traditions were received by the Qurʾān. It is true that the Qurʾān in places shows relatively detailed knowledge of certain biblical traditions, such as the story of Joseph, or the story of Moses and Pharaoh. Yet the Qurʾān's references to these stories seem to have come from the same sources as its references to non-biblical stories, such as the story of the Sleepers of Ephesus (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*; Q 18:9–26) or the story of Alexander the Great (*dhū l-qarnayn*; Q 18:83–98). In other words, the Qurʾān's author(s) seems to have been exposed to those Jewish and Christian Midrashic and homiletic traditions which circulated (orally, above all) in the late antique Near East, and not to the Bible itself. One sign that this was the case is the absence of any precise description of the contents of the Bible. The Qurʾān never refers to a biblical book by name, and it seems to have no knowledge of the principal division of the Jewish Bible (*tanakh*) or the Christian Bible (Old and New Testaments, four Gospels, etc.).

Another sign that the author of the Qurʾān did not have direct exposure to the Bible is the almost complete absence of direct biblical citations in the Qurʾān. The closest thing to a direct citation is likely 21:105: “Certainly We wrote in the Psalms, after the remembrance: ‘Indeed My righteous servants shall inherit the earth,’” a verse which may be a paraphrase of Psalm 37:9 (“For evil-doers will be annihilated, while those who hope in the Lord shall have the land for their own.” But cf. Psalm 37:11, 29); even this verse, however, does not definitively display knowledge of the Psalms. One might also point to the Qurʾān's use of the Gospel metaphor involving a camel and the eye of a needle (7:40; cf. Matthew 19:23–4; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). The Qurʾān, however, applies this metaphor not to a “rich man” as do the Gospels but instead to the man who fails to recognize God's signs. Indeed even these two cases seem to point to the oral transmission of biblical traditions, and not to the citation of a written text.

In other passages, moreover, the Qurʾān seems to attribute to the Bible things which are not in it. Qurʾān 7:157, for example, insists that the “unlettered” or the “gentile” prophet – apparently an allusion to Muḥammad himself – can be found in the “Torah” and the “Gospel” (later Islamic scholarship has accounted for the absence of references to Muḥammad in the Bible either by claiming that the Bible is a corrupt form of the original prophetic scriptures or by insisting that various passages, such as Deuteronomy 18:18 or John 14:16, allude to him). Similarly Qurʾān 9:111 reports that God's promise to give paradise as a reward to those who give their lives and their property to the cause of the holy war is recorded in the “Torah,” the “Gospel,” and the “Qurʾān.” However, paradise is not found (explicitly, at least) in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and a command to fight holy wars is not found in the New Testament. Such verses give one the impression that the author of the Qurʾān assumed that earlier scriptures agreed with the things that he was saying, but that he did not in fact know those scriptures first-hand.

Departures from the Bible

Another sign that the Qur'ānic author was familiar more with biblical traditions than with the Bible itself is the way in which material in the Qur'ān differs from or contradicts material in the Bible. One such case of a Qur'ānic "variant" has already been mentioned: the appearance (Q 2:249) of Saul in the place of Gideon in a version of the account of Judges 7:1–7 involving the thinning out of the Israelites' army. Another such case, also mentioned above, involves instead David. Whereas the Bible (2 Samuel 12) has the prophet Nathan tell a parable about men with sheep, the Qur'ān has David meet real men who have a real problem involving sheep (Q 38:21–6).

More famous still is the case of Mary the mother of Jesus, whom the Qur'ān identifies as the "daughter of 'Imrān" (Q 3:35) and the "sister of Aaron" (Q 19:28). These two identifications suggest that the Qur'ān has confused Mary the mother of Jesus with Miriam (the Hebrew form of Mary) daughter of Amram, the sister of Aaron (although scholars have argued that the Qur'ān means symbolically to associate Mary with the Aaronic priesthood). Similarly the Qur'ān makes Haman, who in the Bible is the vizier of Ahasuerus in Persia, the vizier of Pharaoh in Egypt (28:6, 8, 38; 29:39–40; 40:23–4, 36–7); this is perhaps, as Adam Silverstein (2008) has shown, because of the influence of the Assyrian legend of Ahiqar.

In other cases the Qur'ān seems to depart intentionally and thoughtfully from the details of the Bible. For example, the Qur'ān makes the Pharaoh whom Moses confronts in adulthood the same Pharaoh of his childhood (Q 26:18; cf. Exodus 4:19, which explains that the Pharaoh of Moses' childhood had died) in order to have a scene in which an adopted son confronts his father. Similarly the Qur'ān has Satan make the cupbearer forget to mention Joseph to Pharaoh (Q 12:42; in Genesis [40:23] he simply forgets) in order to emphasize the role of the devil as an enemy to man (2:168, 208; 5:91; 6:112, 142, *passim*), and in particular the danger that Satan might make man forget things (Q 6:68; 58:19; 18:63).

The Qur'ān's Assessment of the Bible

The conclusion that the Qur'ān's author did not know the Bible itself has significant consequences for the way one reads those Qur'ānic passages which seem to challenge the reliability of the scriptures of the Jews and Christians (passages which have been taken by the greater part of Islamic tradition as indications that the Bible is corrupt). In numerous passages the Qur'ān accuses the Jews in particular of falsifying the meaning of words (*yuharrifūna al-kalima*; Q 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41). The Qur'ān also attacks those who have exchanged (*baddalū*) God's word for others (Q 2:59; 7:162), who write down passages which they pretend are from God (Q 2:79), who conceal passages from God or hide revelation behind their backs (2:42, 140, 146, 159, 174; 3:71, 187; 5:15), who twist their tongues, speaking evil (3:78; 4:46), or forget things revealed by God (5:13, 14; 7:53, 165). Collectively such passages suggest that Jews (especially) and Christians are not faithful guardians of the word of God.

It is not clear, however, if these passages amount to a clear rejection of the Bible's reliability (even if they have been taken as such by the majority of Islamic tradition). Indeed in other passages the Qur'ān suggests that the scripture of the Jews and Christians is still reliable. Qur'ān 5:47 relates: "Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has sent down in it," suggesting that the author of the Qur'ān believed that the scripture of the Christians in his milieu was valid. Qur'ān 10:94, which reads as a command given by God to the Prophet, states: "So if you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who read the Book [revealed] before you." Here the Qur'ān seems to affirm, in contrast to other passages (discussed above), that the Jews and Christians are reliable interpreters of God's word. Traditionally such contrasts are understood to be reflections of different stages of Muḥammad's interaction with the People of the Book (but Q 5 is by tradition a late Medinan *sūra*). It is also possible that these contrasting assessments of the Bible (and of the Jews and Christians who read it) reflect different sources or authors.

Debates over the Nature of Biblical Material in the Qur'ān

From the beginnings of academic research on the Qur'ān scholars have offered various theories on the origin and nature of the Qur'ān's biblical material. The first major academic work on the Qur'ān, Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (1833), is dedicated to the question of what narratives and religious ideas Muḥammad learned from Jews, and involves consideration of the manner in which such things could have been transmitted to what Geiger (and almost all Orientalists) assumed to have been Muḥammad's context. The approach of Geiger, and many scholars after him – including Hirschfeld, Horowitz, Nöldeke, Sidersky, Speyer, and Torrey (and, to a lesser extent, Bell) – tends to be shaped by the traditional Islamic reports that there were Jews (but not Christians) in Muḥammad's Medina and that these Jews were the most likely source of much of the biblical material in the Qur'ān. Of course, these scholars also recognized that there must have been some Christian influence on Muḥammad (whom they took as the author of the Qur'ān), since the Qur'ān refers to Christian characters (Jesus, Mary, John, Zechariah) and to Christian legends (the prostration of the angels to Adam, the Sleepers of Ephesus, Alexander legends). Accordingly, they were interested in the reports in the traditional Islamic biography of the Prophet which involve Christians (including those on Waraqa b. Nawfal, cousin of Muḥammad's first wife Khadija, or the Christian delegation from Najrān in South Arabia).

In a 1927 article Alphonse Mingana makes the case that the Qur'ān is the first book in Arabic and that it would accordingly have been influenced by the most important language of Christians in the late antique Near East: Syriac. He attempts to prove the point by offering Syriac etymologies of Qur'ānic vocabulary. Arthur Jeffery, in his *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (1938), repeatedly observes that Qur'ānic vocabulary is closer to Christian languages (Syriac, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Ethiopic) than to Jewish languages (Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic). For his part Tor Andrae shows that the Qur'ān – not only in its narrative sections but also in its description of the apocalypse,

and of heaven and hell – is in harmony with Syriac Christian traditions. Still Andrae remained attached to the traditional stories that place the origins of the Qurʾān in Muḥammad’s Mecca and Medina, and he felt obliged to imagine how Syriac -speaking Christians might have influenced Muḥammad there.

The middle of the twentieth century (with the notable exception of Paret’s Qurʾān commentary) would see a profound decline in work on the biblical background of the Qurʾān, and on Islamic origins generally. In some ways William Montgomery Watt’s biography of Muḥammad – which is shaped by a secular reading of the traditional Islamic sources – is symbolic of that period. This scholarly silence on the topic made the appearance of John Wansbrough’s *Qurʾānic Studies* (1977) all the more dramatic. Wansbrough, informed by German New Testament scholarship, rejected the almost universal notion that the Qurʾān should be read through the lens of the traditional biography; he proposed that much of that biography is exegetical, and that the Qurʾān might be a composite work, the product of multiple authors and different layers of redaction.

The freeing of the Qurʾān from the traditional biography of the Prophet brought about by his work has led many scholars in more recent times to think about the Qurʾān in the larger context of the late antique Near East. One such scholar was Christoph Luxenberg, whose much criticized work *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (2000) again brought attention to the Qurʾān’s relationship to Syriac. Whereas Luxenberg focuses his attention on finding Syriac etymologies for particular Qurʾānic terms or turns of phrase, other scholars – including Emran El-Badawi, Sidney Griffith, and Gabriel Said Reynolds – have looked more broadly at the special relationship of the Qurʾān with Syriac Christian literature. Unlike the early Orientalists, these scholars tend not to think of the Qurʾān as borrowing material from Syriac Christian sources (the Bible or otherwise). Instead they tend to attribute agency to the Qurʾān, arguing that the Qurʾān alludes to narratives or traditions still accessible to us in Syriac Christian texts (such as the *Cave of Treasures*, Jacob of Serugh’s *Homilies Against the Jews*, or Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*) while it develops its original religious message. From the perspective of these scholars the Qurʾān actually provides a window into the way Jews and Christians were reading the Bible, and telling biblical stories, in the late antique Near East.

Still other scholars, following a long tradition of Western scholarship, have argued that the Qurʾān reflects the particular influence of certain “heterodox” movements, usually held to be some type of Jewish Christians. These scholars include Shlomo Pines, Yūsuf al-Ḥaddād, Joseph Azzi, and more recently François de Blois, Edouard Gallez, and Joachim Gnilka. Holger Zellentín argues that the Qurʾān has a particular relationship with the Syriac *Didascalia*, while Jan Van Reeth has asked if the “Gospel” of the Qurʾān is in fact the lost “Harmony of the Gospels” or the *Diatesseron*.

Other scholars have cautioned against this tendency to see the Qurʾān in close conversation with the Bible. In a 1986 article Marilyn Robinson Waldman, using the story of Joseph as an example, refutes the idea that Qurʾānic accounts should be seen as later or derivative versions of original biblical accounts. She contends that the theological message and literary qualities of the Qurʾān are so distinct that its “biblical” material cannot be properly described as “biblical.” Angelika Neuwirth argues stridently against

Wansbrough, insisting that the Qurʾān is not composite, that the chronology developed by Nöldeke is fundamentally reliable, and that the basic outline of the Prophet's life in the medieval biographical literature is accurate. Accordingly she shows a particular interest in the traditions which have Muḥammad (and the Islamic community) interacting with the Jewish community in Medina. She also frequently allows for the possibility that (so-called) "Meccan" *sūras* have been reworked or edited in the Medinan period.

Finally, it is important to add that certain scholars have raised the possibility that at the heart of the Qurʾān is a transferal of biblical traditions to an Arabian context. One such case would be the Abraham and Ishmael material in the Qurʾān. Whereas Genesis (21) has Hagar and Ishmael cast out into the desert of Beersheba, the Qurʾān (2:124–9) seems to have Abraham and Ishmael in Mecca, building the Kaʿba. Reuven Firestone studies this material in his 1990 work *Journeys in Holy Lands*. More recently this Arabization thesis has been supported by Joseph Witztum, Jacqueline Chabbi, Uri Rubin, and Aziz al-Azmeh, who has made a significant contribution to the position that the Qurʾān reflects an Arabian context in *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (2014a).

Thus in recent years more and more scholars have worked on the relationship between the Qurʾān and the Bible, although they explain this relationship with diverse, and often conflicting, theories. Nevertheless, through this work the academic community has generally come to appreciate that the story of the Qurʾān is part of a larger story of the history of biblical literature.

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CHAPTER 20

Other Religions

Mun'im Sirry

The Qur'ān's attitude toward other religions has been the subject of much discussion, yet it is a mistake to assume that the Qur'ān has a coherent ethical position about how Muslims should treat the other. While there are many passages in the Qur'ān that seem to promote a peaceful coexistence among different religious communities, others are exclusive in nature in the sense that they not only describe other religious communities, notably Jews and Christians, negatively, but also criticize them in terms of both doctrines and social interactions. As is known, several passages in the Qur'ān criticize Jews and Christians for their seemingly erroneous beliefs. This Qur'ānic criticism of other religions has often been viewed as an obstacle to peaceful coexistence and detrimental to the modern wisdom that the religious belief of others must be tolerated and respected. In a modern society, the notion of religious tolerance has generally been accepted and become more or less axiomatic. Perhaps this "norm" of the modern world, which demands a tolerant attitude toward the religious belief of others, has led to some sort of reluctance among scholars to discuss the polemical attitude of the Qur'ān toward the "other." Of course, there are other passages in the Qur'ān that seem to show sympathetic attitudes and extend salvific promise to others. Unlike the polemical passages, these seemingly tolerant passages of the Qur'ān have been much discussed to provide the scriptural grounds for interreligious dialogue in the modern context.

This chapter discusses the Qur'ān's worldview of the other that has shaped Muslims' attitudes toward other religions even today. Some of the questions that form the major concern of this chapter are: How does the Qur'ān view the other? Why do there exist different approaches in the Qur'ān to other religious communities? Under what circumstances did those polemical passages emerge? Is there room for interpreting

them differently in light of religious plurality in the modern world? How have polemical and non-polemical passages of the Qurʾān been dealt with by modern scholars? The basic contention here is that Qurʾānic criticism reflects a polemical environment in which Islam emerged historically and, therefore, can be reinterpreted fruitfully for interactions among different religious communities in the modern world. This chapter begins with the Qurʾān's ambivalent attitudes and its interreligious context, and then looks at hermeneutical strategies employed by modern scholars. Some of the difficulties facing modern scholars in their understanding of the Qurʾānic criticism of seemingly heretical teachings of Christianity will also be highlighted. Since the Qurʾān "asserts little connection to a contemporary social world beyond a number of generalised facets of society" (Rippin 2013: 174), this chapter concludes with a brief reflection on how this discussion of the Qurʾān's view of the other may lead us to better understand the nature of its audience.

Ambivalent Attitudes

It must be stated at the outset that the Qurʾān displays an ambivalent attitude toward the other. On the one hand, there are passages in the Qurʾān that seem to extend salvific promise to other religious communities. One of the oft-quoted verses is Q 2:62: "Those who believe and those Jews, Christians and Sabeans, whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." In this verse, the main criteria for salvation are (1) belief in God and the Last Day, and (2) doing good deeds. Q 5:48, especially the second part, "For each one of you We have appointed a law (*shirʿa*) and a way (*minhāj*). If God so willed, He would have made you a single people (*umma*)," clearly allows for the possibility of religious plurality. The notion of tolerance in this passage is so arresting in its breadth to the extent that religious diversity should not only be tolerated, but is also necessarily good. Perhaps the Qurʾānic vision of religious freedom is best captured in the following two verses, namely, "There will be no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:265) and "To you your religion and to me mine" (Q 190:5).

On the other hand, however, several passages in the Qurʾān advocate an exclusivist approach to other religions by depicting Islam as the only true path to salvation. There are, at least, three Qurʾānic passages that have commonly been understood to support some kind of exclusionary and intolerant theological orientation. Such verses are:

Q 3:19: Verily the right religion with God is *al-islām*. Those to whom the Book had been revealed differed among themselves only after Knowledge had come to them, competing in rivalry with one another. Whoever blasphemes against God's revelations, God is swift at reckoning.

Q 3:85: Whoever desires a religion other than *al-islām*, it shall not be accepted from him; and in the afterlife he will be among the losers.

Q 5:3: Today I have perfected your religion; and I have completed My bounty upon you; and I have sanctioned *al-islām* as your religion.

It is only in these three verses that *islām* is referred to in the context of *al-dīn*, which is usually rendered as religion. These verses speak of *islām* being the only acceptable faith, and thus they have generally been invoked to claim the superiority of Islam to other religions and that the theology and rituals of Islam are the exclusive path to salvation. It is, therefore, hardly surprising to hear Muslims claiming that religions other than their own have no ground to claim any amount of religious truth in them. With reference to these verses, Yohanan Friedmann asserts that “Muslims have come to believe earnestly that Islam was the only true religion” (2003: 34). In his discussion of Qur’ān commentators, both medieval and modern, Mahmoud Ayoub concludes that they “have used the verse [3:85] to argue for the finality and supersession of Islam over all other religions” (1992: II, 241). Mohammad Fadel describes “the dominant medieval theological position which can be fairly characterized as a strong commitment to the notion of ‘no salvation outside of Islam’” (2013: 37).

Belonging to this category of exclusivist passages are those verses of the Qur’ān that criticize the religious beliefs of others. In two places (Q 5:17 and 72), for instance, the Qur’ān criticizes what seems to be the Christian belief of the divinity of Jesus: “They disbelieve who say that God is the Messiah son of Mary.” Other passages criticize the Christian doctrine of Trinity, such as Q 4:171 (“So believe in God and His messengers, and do not say: ‘Three!’ Desist, for this would be best for you”) and 5:73 (“They disbelieve who say that God is the third of three”). In Q 5:116, the Qur’ānic Jesus himself speaks out to disown the errors of Christians. When asked by God as to whether he told people to take him and Mary “as two gods, apart from God,” Jesus insists: “It is not mine to say what I have no right to.” One may infer from the last three verses that the Qur’ānic understanding of Trinity is consisting of God, Jesus, and Mary, rather than the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Of course, these passages raise a host of important questions: What is being criticized in the Qur’ān? Why does the Qur’ān seem to include Mary as one of the three persons of the Trinity? Does the Qur’ānic understanding of the Trinity oppose a truly Christian concept of God, or does it reflect a rather heretical teaching?

Even on the much discussed issue of the Muslim charge that pre-Qur’ānic scriptures have been falsified, the Qur’ān is less straightforward than is sometimes supposed. The Qur’ān makes explicit references to earlier scriptures, such as *tawrā* (Torah), *injīl* (Gospel), *zabūr* (psalm), *suḥuf* (scrolls), and *alwāḥ* (tablets). In several places the Qur’ān presents a positive characterization of previous scriptures as containing “guidance and light” (Q 5:44; 6:154), “guidance and admonition” (Q 5:46), and “the judgment of God” (Q 5:43). The fact that the Qur’ān itself comes to confirm them also affirms the divine origin of these scriptures. The word used in this regard is “*musaddiq*,” which appears eighteen times in the Qur’ān and means confirming, attesting, or pronouncing to be true. This active participle occurs several times in both the Meccan and Medinan *sūras*. What is striking is that it is only in the Medinan *sūras* that the explicit statement about the confirmation of the previous scriptures can be found. The subject of confirmation in those passages is generally “that which I have revealed (*mā anzaltu*)” or a similar phrase. For example, the Torah appears as the object of confirmation in three passages, namely, 3:50, 5:46, and 61:6. Whereas in the Medinan passage (3:50), it is the Qur’ān that confirms the Torah (*muṣaddiqan limā bayna yadayya min al-tawrā*); in the

Meccan passage (61:6), it is Jesus' claim: "Children of Israel, I am the messenger of God to you, confirming what preceded me of the Torah."

While the above passages recognize the divine origin of Jewish and Christian scriptures, there are a number of verses that refer to certain "distortions" of the scriptures by some groups of the People of the Book. Terms used for this vary, but the most obvious is *tahrīf*, which is generally translated as "falsification," "alteration," or "corruption." There are four Qur'ānic verses that use derivatives of the term *tahrīf*. For instance, "For violating their covenant We cursed them, and hardened their hearts. They twist words from their context, and have forgotten a portion of what they were asked to remember" (Q 5:13; see also 2:75; 4:46; 5:41). The Qur'ān also talks about Jewish and Christian distortion of their scriptures either with their hands (2:79) or with their tongues (3:78). The Qur'ānic charge of the falsification of Jewish and Christian scriptures is perhaps the most common topic that has been used over centuries by Muslim polemicists against Judaism and Christianity. Kate Zebiri is correct when saying that, even among contemporary Muslims, the doctrine of the falsification of previous scriptures is "virtually unchallenged" (1997: 50).

In addition to theological and scriptural aspects, the Qur'ān also addresses the social facet of interreligious relations, which includes its resentment of others' social behaviors due to the negative response Muḥammad received from his surrounding communities, especially the Jewish and Christian communities. The Qur'ān contends, for instance, that "many rabbis (*al-aḥbār*) and monks (*ruḥbān*) consume the wealth of people unjustly and bar the way to the path of God. And those who hoard gold and silver, and do not spend them in the cause of God – warn them of a most painful punishment" (Q 9:34). It also condemns the Jews because of "their taking usury, though forbidden to do so; and their devouring the wealth of people dishonestly" (Q 4:161). These socially and economically oppressive practices are attributed to their arrogance as being the chosen people, claiming that they were "friends of God to the exclusion of the rest of mankind" (Q 62:6); they also call themselves "the children of God and His beloved" (Q 5:18). Whenever they committed sins, they would say that their punishment will not last but for a few days: "The Fire shall not touch us except for a few days only" (Q 2:80; 3:24).

Furthermore, there are several passages in the Qur'ān that seem to restrict interreligious engagements between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially Jews and Christians. In *sūra al-Mā'ida* (5:51), it is said: "O believers, take not Jews and Christians for *awliyā'*; they are *awliyā'* of each other. Whoever among you takes them as his *awliyā'* is counted of their number. God guides not the wrongdoers." The word *awliyā'* is left in its original Arabic because it has various meanings, such as friends, allies, patrons, guardians, protectors, or leaders, the precise meaning of which becomes a contentious issue among modern scholars. In *sūra al-Mā'ida* alone this prohibition is repeated in verses 57 and 81. The Qur'ān sometimes uses the term "*kuffār*" (unbelievers), instead of Jews and Christians (4:89, 139, and 144). The frequent occurrence of this prohibition is indicative of the seriousness of the matter, at least at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad.

The following question remains, then: How has the ambivalent attitude of the Qur'ān been solved? Which of these conflicting attitudes should be the ethical position of Muslims in their relations with non-Muslims? Are some passages more relevant than

others? How do we reconcile the conflicting messages? Is it proper to accept some texts as valid while rejecting others?

The Qur'ān and Its Interreligious Context

The traditional reading of these conflicting attitudes involves two strategies. The first is to look at the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) to provide historical contexts for revelations that would help readers understand the circumstances in which certain passages were revealed. The problem with relying on *asbāb al-nuzūl* is that there are often conflicting narratives such that Qur'ān commentators themselves “seldom agree and often contradict one another” (Firestone 1999: 49). A number of scholars consider the *asbāb al-nuzūl* merely as the product of an exegetic elaboration on the Qur'ānic text. The Iranian scholar Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī refers to the narratives of *asbāb al-nuzūl* as “merely giving theoretical reasons and are not based on factual events” (1980: VI, 285). The narrative expansion of the Qur'ānic verse, as Andrew Rippin has argued, is purportedly designed to explain the Qur'ān and it reflects “a general desire to historicize the text of the Qur'ān in order to prove constantly that God really did reveal His book to humanity on earth” (1988: 2). The second and more elaborated strategy to solve the seemingly contradictory material is by way of *al-nāsikh wal-mansūkh* (the abrogating and abrogated [verses]). *Naskh*, or abrogation, is a legal strategy by which a verse of the Qur'ān revealed earlier is considered superseded or abrogated by a later revelation, thereby becoming inactive. The theory of *naskh* as a hermeneutical stratagem to solve the seemingly contradictory materials was elaborated quite early on by Muslim scholars. Abū Ja'far al-Naḥḥās (d. 338/950) wrote a book on this subject entitled *al-Nāsikh wa al-mansūkh* (1988) in which he lists several ecumenical passages that have been abrogated or superseded by the overtly exclusive passages. However, like the problem of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the early Muslim scholars who developed this theory also disagreed greatly over which verses abrogated which.

These two strategies point to a common assumption that the Qur'ān's contradictory statements can be understood in terms of its chronological order in the sense that such verses reflect different phases in Muḥammad's life. In the Meccan period, where the newborn religion was still weak, the question of faith is left to be decided by God in the next world. This attitude of tolerance seems to shift in Medina, where the Qur'ān becomes more aggressive and exclusive in its polemic against not only the pagans but also Jews and Christians. In verses supposedly from the Meccan period, the Qur'ān seems to speak of Jews and Christians in positive terms, calling them “the People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*). Even the terms “*naṣārā*” as referring to Christians or “*yahūd*” and/or “*hūd*” as referring to Jews occur only in Medinan *sūras*, which reflect the absence of immediate concern toward them in the Meccan *sūras*. As Richard Bell observes, “during the whole of the Meccan period of his activity Muḥammad's attitude to the People of the Book, which must be taken as including both Jews and Christians...was consistently friendly” (1926: 147). Those who doubt the truth of Muḥammad's message are encouraged to consult a scripture revealed before him (Q 21:7; 16:43; 10:94). The

Qurʾān even tells us that “those to whom We have given the Book rejoice at what has been revealed to you” (Q 13:36).

Scholars offer different explanations as to why the Meccan revelations refer to Jews and Christians as those who support and confirm the truth of Muḥammad’s message. S. D. Goitein (1971: 81), for instance, argues that Muḥammad did encounter some positive response from Jews and Christians in Mecca. Fazlur Rahman’s position seems to be conflicting. On the one hand he agrees with Goitein, arguing that there were “among the followers of Judaism and (whether orthodox or not) of Christianity some who affirmed the truth of the Prophet’s mission and, in fact, encouraged him in the face of Meccan opposition” (1989: 137). Rahman admits, however, that it would be hard to prove the presence of a significant number of Jews and Christians in Mecca. Rahman (1979: 26) also argues that the Meccan allusions to the People of the Book are based on assumptions about what the Jews and Christians should have been like and about how they can be expected to have been, rather than on actual encounters with specific people, as at Medina.

The situation at Medina was quite different. The dominant theme in the early Medinan period is the change in relations with the large Jewish population there. Contact with Christians is also a significant theme, although this is largely later in the Medinan period. From the early Medinan period onward, there had emerged a kind of competition for authority with the People of the Book. This is reflected in a number of ways. For example, Abraham, a crucial figure from religious history, is claimed as one who prefigured the faith of Muḥammad and his followers, rather than that of Jews and Christians. This is an idea which is not found in the Meccan revelations. During the Meccan period, more prominence was given to Moses than to Abraham. Even the term “*milla*” (communal belief) mentioned in connection with Abraham was not yet exclusively his religion at Mecca, but *milla ibrahīm wa ishāq wa ya‘qūb* (Q 12:30). It is only in the Medinan period that the term “*milla*” is exclusively associated with Abraham, and he was called “*ḥanīfan musliman*.” What causes the change has been the subject of a number of studies and will not be repeated here.

Up to this point, it seems clear that there is a shift in the language of the Qurʾān. Whereas in the Meccan period Qurʾānic references to the People of the Book are rather “neutral” or even “positive,” Medinan verses are marked by a gradually more polemical discourse. Perhaps the polemical language of the Qurʾān can best be understood as a response to the rejection of and opposition to Muḥammad’s message. In other words, the Qurʾān articulates its response sometimes in harsh language against older religious communities that were trying to bring about the demise of a religion it represents. In that context, the Qurʾān uses polemical language to sharply define the identity of the community of believers in different phases of their development. Angelika Neuwirth’s careful study of the Qurʾānic presentation of Mary (Maryam) and Jesus (Īsā) in the Meccan *sūra* (*sūra al-Maryam*) and the Medinan *sūra* (*sūra Āl ‘Imrān*) is helpful in this regard. She concludes that *sūra Maryam* was remodeled to fit into more polemical environments in Medina. Such a re-reading of Mary and Jesus in the new perspective of *sūra Āl ‘Imrān*, Neuwirth argues, “serves a ‘political’ purpose: to disempower the predominant Jewish tradition represented by Āl Ibrāhīm, whose weighty superiority in terms of scriptural authority had to be counter-balanced” (2008: 282; see also 2010a: 499–531).

It seems safe to say that the conflict with the Jews of Medina was so deep that even when the Qur'ān deals with Jesus the Medinan passages are governed by polemics against Jews. For instance, Jews were accused of killing prophets sent forth before Muḥammad. In *sūra* 4:156–7, “And for their unbelief and their uttering against Mary a mighty calumny; and for their saying, ‘We killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God’ – they did not kill him, neither crucified him, but so it was only made to appear to them. Those who are at variance concerning him surely are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of conjecture. Indeed, they did not kill him.” Most Muslim commentators understand this passage to mean that Jesus did not die on the cross, yet a careful reading of the precise wording shows that this is not directed against Christian belief. These are certainly verses of polemics against the Jews of Medina, because what is denied is the Jewish contention that the crucifixion has been a victory for them. Of course, there are passages criticizing Christian belief directly, which may reflect Muḥammad’s increased contact with Christians in the last years of the Medinan period.

However, one of the weaknesses of reading the Qur'ān in chronological order, and thus of applying the theory of abrogation (*naskh*), is that there is a certain amount of overlap that urges us not to think of Qur'ānic criticisms of Judaism and Christianity in chronological terms, assuming that the earlier Medinan passages reflect conflict only with the Jews whereas the later passages exclusively focus on the Christians. This is one example of the limits of chronological reading, which assumes that there is a clear line between early and later Medinan revelations. That doesn't seem to be the case. Instead, some verses critical of Christian belief may date from the same time as passages attacking the Jews of Medina. Likewise, in the latest phase the depiction of Jesus can still serve the purpose of polemics against Jewish opponents. Nevertheless, it is from the later Medinan verses that we learn that the Qur'ān portrays Jesus and Mary at the heart of a theological controversy, especially by blaming the Christians for their attitude toward the divinity of Jesus.

Even within the supposedly polemical environment in Medina, the Qur'ān still expresses some sort of ecumenical attitude. The inclusive passage in *sūra al-Baqara* (Q 2:62), which, according to the traditional reading, is revealed in the early Meccan phase, is repeated almost verbatim in *sūra al-Mā'ida*, which is one of the last *sūras* revealed to Muḥammad. The fact that such “ecumenical” verses occur at the beginning and end of Muḥammad’s prophetic career at Medina means that “neither the words nor the purport of these two identical verses were abrogated” (Ayoub 2005: 277). Many Muslim scholars look to the above-mentioned verse of *sūra al-Mā'ida* (Q 5:48) as a virtual manifesto of the Qur'ānic vision of religious pluralism. They maintain that this passage presents religious pluralism as a divine mystery that must be accepted as a given to allow for smooth communal relations in public life (see Sirry 2009: 423–38). Instead of explaining the problem of Qur'ānic contradiction through the classic Islamic “evolutionary theory,” Reuven Firestone proposes that “the conflicting verses of revelation articulate the views of different factions existing simultaneously within the early Muslim community of Muhammad’s day and, perhaps, continuing for a period after his death” (1999: 64–5). It is not unlikely that this variety of factions is what the Qur'ān and Muhammad responded to.

Thus, the chronological reading of the Qurʾān's ambivalent approach to the other, and by extension the application of the theory of *naskh*, is insufficient to address the Qurʾān's complex relations to the other, or at least should not be viewed as the only possible solution. The problem becomes more acute when dealing with the polemical passages of the Qurʾān that criticize the religious beliefs of others. It often presents an "ambiguous" position in the sense that it is not clear what is being criticized in it. In verses that seem to criticize the Christian doctrine of Trinity (Q 5:17, 72, and 116), as mentioned above, the Qurʾān seems to accuse Christians not only of believing in tri-theism, but also of including Mary as a member of the Trinity, a teaching that is obviously rejected by Christians themselves. Of course, these polemical passages are difficult to answer through chronological readings and the theory of abrogation. The problem is that Christians believe in the Trinity that consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, rather than Allāh, Jesus, and Mary, which the Qurʾān seems to envision.

Approaches to Polemical Passages

Another approach based on the Qurʾān's interreligious context that scholars have developed to deal with the ambiguous nature of Qurʾānic criticism is what we may call a "heretical explanation." According to this approach, the Qurʾān does not address the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, but the Trinity doctrine of heretical sects. Therefore, the Qurʾān need not be thought hostile to orthodox Christianity *per se*, only to certain distortions of it. In his article published in 1967, entitled "Christianity Criticized in the Qurʾān," William Montgomery Watt points out that the Qurʾān attacks Christian heresies rather than orthodox Christianity. He then concludes, "If the main contention of this article is sound, namely, that there is no primary attack on Christianity in the Qurʾān, then a widespread realization of this point has profound implication for the relations of Islam and Christianity now and in years to come" (1967: 197–201). Of course, this argument is a significant departure from polemicists' contention that Muḥammad was ill-informed about or had misunderstood Jewish and Christian doctrines. Chawkat Moucarry, for instance, contends, "What the Qurʾān rightly repudiates is a *misconception* of the Trinity" (2001: 188). However, the use of the word "misconception" may be too strong. It is possible that Christians themselves had a different conception of the Trinity from that understood today, and so it was not misunderstood at all. Christianity, it must be remembered, has also been flexible and undergone many changes both in time and in its greater insistence on dogmatic universality. At the time Muḥammad was alive, there were far more different types of Christians – and Jews – which is understandable considering the isolation and lack of centrality these communities experienced.

Other scholars go further by saying that the Qurʾānic view of Trinity was in fact influenced by Christian popular religiosity and devotional practices. It is possible, they argue, that the Qurʾān's idea of Mary's divinity might have come from Christian sects that exalted Mary far above her usual Christian status (see Kalner 1999: 272). There is some evidence for the existence of such groups in Arabia, one of which was called the

Collyridians, composed mainly of women, who worshiped the Virgin Mary. They were originally from Thrace, although they had spread north into Scythia and south into Arabia, and their central ritual involved the offering up of a “small cake” (Greek: *collyris*; hence the name Collyridians). Geoffrey Ashe (1988) traces the Collyridians back to the Virgin Mary herself. In Ashe’s account, after being rebuffed by the early church leaders, the historical Mary left Jerusalem and founded a community of holy women in some wilderness area. This community continued to flourish after Mary’s death, especially in those areas (including Arabia) where the influence of the early official church was little felt.

A similar explanation is put forward by the Syrian Muslim Qur’ān commentator Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914), who argues for the possibility that Q 5:73 refers to the Collyridians. He claims: “Among the Christians there was a group (*firqā*) called ‘Collyridians’ who said that gods are three: the Father, the Son, and Mary” (1957: VI, 2098). Therefore, al-Qāsimī glosses the Qur’ānic phrase “God is the third of three” as follows: “One of the three gods; it means, one of them, namely God, Mary, and Jesus” (ibid.). Similarly, in his interpretation of 4:171, the Qur’ānic phrase “Do not say: Three!” is glossed “Three gods: God, the Messiah, and Mary.” It is based on the verse “Did you really say to people: ‘Take me and my mother as two gods, instead of God?’” (Q 5:116). He then says, “It is possible that this matter was written in their manuscripts (*nusakh*) and therefore the Qur’ān denied it” (1957: V, 1765). Al-Qāsimī also cites *Kitāb ‘ilm al-yaqīn*, which had referred to a Christian sect called Maryāmiyyūn. To further reinforce his view, he argues that the historian Ibn Ishāq in his *Sīra* affirms that among the Christians of Najrān who visited the Prophet there were some who said “Jesus is God,” others who said “He is the son of God,” and still others who said “He is the third of three,” namely God, Jesus, and Mary. Q 5:73 was revealed in response to all of their statements.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the Qur’ān was influenced by their presence in Arabia. The historical evidence of Collyridians has been called into question because the information about this Christian sect is only recorded by St. Epiphanius of Salamis, who denounced the cult as “foolish, crazy idolatry and the work of the devil” (see Benko 1993: 171). St. Epiphanius describes the Collyridians as a group of women first in Thrace and Scythia and then in Arabia who “prepare a certain carriage with a square seat and spread out fine linens over it on a special day of the year, and they put forth a bread and offer it in the name of Mary, and they all partake of the bread” (cited by Shoemaker 2008: 76–7). Some modern scholars like Michael P. Carroll downplay the importance of this sect, saying, “If anything, the lack of references to the Collyridians in the early literature on heresy suggests that they were an obscure sect of no great importance” (1986: 44–5). On this issue, Richard Bell writes, “Our information about these is very meagre, if indeed what we have is not due to Epiphanius’ imagination. It is possible, however, that some of the heretical movements persecuted in the Empire may have sought refuge in Arabia and helped to form the soil out of which Islam grew” (1926: 20).

Putting this specific Christian sect aside, the existence of the cultic devotion to the Virgin Mary before the advent of Islam has been historically attested, albeit with

scholars disagreeing on its origins. Some argue that cultic devotion to Mary was a part of the religious landscape of the eastern Mediterranean world before the Council of Ephesus (431). According to Stephen Shoemaker, St. Epiphanius' attack on the Collyridians' practices can be understood within a broader critique of the veneration of saints. Of course, Epiphanius exaggerates in his critique to such an extent that he smears his opponents with the charge of replacing God with Mary. Shoemaker has argued persuasively that "it is by no means clear that this widely held opinion of the Collyridians represents an accurate understanding of their beliefs and practices" (2008: 77). Similarly, it is not at all impossible that the Qur'ānic accusation that Christians claim Mary as God can be understood as a rhetorical statement to polemicize their beliefs and practices. Another possible explanation for the Qur'ānic reference to Mary as one of the three gods, which is often overlooked in recent scholarship, is the goddess connotation of Mary that is found in relatively early Christian apocrypha. The Gnostic literature such as the Gospel of Philip, for instance, seems to identify Jesus' mother with the Holy Spirit, while the Gospel of the Hebrews describes Mary as an incarnation of the archangel Michael, and the Odes of Solomon describe Mary as Wisdom (see Klauck 2003: 38–42, 123–34; Davidson 2005; Maunder 2008: 28).

In any case, for quite some time scholars have been prone to characterizing Arabia as the motherland of heresies. The American Protestant missionary Samuel Zwemer writes, "Arabia was at one time called 'the mother of heresies'" (1900: 306). As Bell notes, "Arabia (by which probably is meant the Roman province of Arabia, not the land of the nomads) had a reputation in the early Church as a source of heresies" (1926: 20). "Mohammed never knew the doctrine of the Catholic Church, of orthodox Christianity," the Catholic theologian Giulio Basseti-Sani contends, "hence he was unable to reject it. He rejected *distortions* of Christianity" (1977: 30).

In more recent critical scholarship of the Qur'ān, as represented by the works of G. R. Hawting, Sidney Griffith, and Gabriel Reynolds, there is a shift from the "heretical explanation" to the emphasis on the rhetorical language of the Qur'ān. According to these scholars, the heretical element in the Qur'ān should not be understood as referring to heretical sects, but rather as a rhetorical device developed by the Qur'ān to win over an argument in such a polemical environment. When the Qur'ān claims that Christians said "God is Jesus the son of Mary" or "God is the third of three," these should be understood as polemical statements. The Qur'ān is aware that Christians did not say that. Griffith states, "The Qur'ān's seeming misstatement, rhetorically speaking, should therefore not be thought to be a mistake, but rather a polemically inspired caricature, the purpose of which is to highlight in Islamic terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness, of the Christian belief, from an Islamic perspective" (2011: 311). Even when the Qur'ān accuses its opponents of being polytheists (*mushrikūn*), as Hawting (1999) has pointed out, it uses the term for a polemical purpose. In the same line of argument, Reynolds persuasively argues that "in passages involving Christianity in the Qur'ān we should look for the Qur'ān's creative use of rhetoric, and not for the influence of Christian heretics" (n.d., unpublished paper). This explanation does make sense when we closely examine the text of the Qur'ān itself without relying on the Muslim tradition. As the above scholars have demonstrated, the Qur'ān seems to present a

different picture of its audience than that of the Muslim sources. Since the Qur'ān is portrayed in the traditional Muslim sources as emerging within a pagan environment in the Hijāz, we might expect it to be filled with full descriptions of pagan beliefs. However, that is not the case. As Arthur Jeffery rightly notes, "It comes, therefore, as no little surprise, to find how little of the religious belief of this Arabian paganism is reflected in the pages of the Qur'ān" (2007: 1). The argument that the Hijāz was the home of Jewish and Christian heresies is based on the assumption of the remoteness of Mecca at the time of Muḥammad. This assumption has been severely questioned by scholars, and it is therefore more convincing to argue that Arabia was not as isolated as has been generally assumed, or that the religious polemic addressed in the Qur'ān may be from beyond Arabia (see Hoyland 2001; Basher 1997).

It can be argued that if we understand the Qur'ānic statement as polemical, perhaps the problem of inaccuracies and misconceptions can be put aside. As is well known, polemical writings are intended not only to prove one's own viewpoint but also to disapprove others' views even to the point of distorting descriptions so as to make them unacceptable. It seems more likely that the Qur'ān employs a rhetorical strategy in the form of polemical statements to win an argument against its rejecters. In such a polemical environment the Qur'ān has devised an effective tool to discredit the opponents' belief, although such accusation can have elements of exaggeration. Polemics flourish in a specific communal milieu where individuals require the psychological assurance that their understanding of reality is the only right one. This deeper psychological attitude is what polemicists share, rather than the surface differences in their various beliefs. Similarly, scriptural polemic inevitably records the tension and arguments of specific events and times early on in religious formation. As those polemical passages in the Qur'ān reflect an ongoing conflict in the early formation of Muslim religious identity, they can be reinterpreted differently and fruitfully in light of religious diversity in the modern context.

Concluding Remarks

The nature of the interreligious milieu within which the Qur'ān came into existence is of course more complex than is sometimes assumed. This is reflected not only in the way the Qur'ān offers a variety of responses that are at times in conflict with one another, but also in its description of the religious belief of others. While it is commonly assumed that the Qur'ān emerged within a pagan environment in the Hijāz, it is telling that it says little, if anything, about the religious belief of Hijāzi pagans. From the internal evidence in the Qur'ān, including its criticism of the other, it seems obvious that the Qur'ān engages with more complex religious facets than is presented in the traditional Muslim sources. The fact that the Qur'ān contains highly allusive and often obscure references to Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the other prophets indicates that its audience is familiar with biblical materials and related apocrypha. It is, therefore, more fashionable in the recent scholarship to read the Qur'ān in light of the larger context of the Jewish and Christian traditions in the late antique Near East. From the Qur'ān we

learn that its opponents present highly sophisticated arguments on a variety of theological issues, which reflects the degree of their acquaintance with interreligious debates taking place in the broader context of the Near East. The fact that there are heretical elements in its critique such as in the case of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity should not lead us to conclude that the Qurʾān addresses only specific groups in the isolated Hijāz.

There are, at least, two related implications of the discussion of the interreligious context of the Qurʾān. First, the Qurʾānic polemics against Jews and Christians show the extent to which Muḥammad was familiar with a large number of religious and cultural terms of those surrounding communities. For many scholars, it would be natural that the Qurʾān “borrowed” such terms from Jewish and Christian sources. The point here is not to prove or reject this theory of “borrowing” but to highlight that the study of scriptural polemics is helpful in our attempt to reconstruct the religious scenario of early periods in the development of religious communities. Second, the emergence of Islam should not be viewed as distinct from the process of the emergence of the other divisions of monotheism. In other words, the origins of Islam cannot be understood without taking into account a pattern of creative interaction with the other Near Eastern monotheistic faiths.

In fact, the Qurʾān seems to respond to the divergence of polemical statements that had been in the air for a while, which resulted in sectarianism, disputes, and differences among the Jews and Christians on the one hand, and among divergent sects within Judaism and Christianity themselves on the other. At least, some Medinan verses are concerned with the nature of their differences about early scriptures: “We had brought Moses the Book, and disputes arose concerning it. Were it not for a prior Word from your Lord, judgment would have been passed upon them. They are in perplexing doubt concerning it” (Q 11:110). It seems that the Qurʾān takes up the issue of religious polemics because it serves very well its main purpose, that is, to restore and uphold a monotheistic religion taught by Abraham. Within such an interreligious environment, the Qurʾān therefore presupposes to some extent a basic knowledge of biblical stories in its audience. It also gives the impression of being addressed to an audience that could supply the missing details to which the text only alludes.

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CHAPTER 21

Argumentation

Kate Zebiri

Argumentation is a very prominent aspect of the Qurʾān, and an inherent part of its discourse; any reader will quickly notice how frequently the text addresses protagonists, whether real or imagined. This reflects the original circumstances in which the Qurʾān came into existence: Muḥammad encountered extensive opposition over the course of his mission, not just from the pagans in Mecca but from the Jews and “hypocrites” (nominal, opportunistic converts to Islam who often sought to undermine Muḥammad), mainly in Medina. The Qurʾān describes in some detail the arguments of those who oppose its message, both from the time of Muḥammad and from earlier times when previous prophets encountered opposition; it also provides counterarguments. There are also numerous scenes of debate, not just between prophets and their peoples but also, for example, between Moses and Pharaoh and between God and Satan.

The degree to which the Qurʾān interacts with its environment over the period of revelation (approximately twenty-three years according to majority scholarly opinion) can scarcely be overstated; one can even find within the text answers to specific questions which were put to Muḥammad by his contemporaries. In fact the Qurʾān is unique among scriptures in the extent to which it engages its audience and addresses them directly. The dynamic, interactive quality of the Qurʾān can be further appreciated when one bears in mind its oral character; while the present-day reader is likely to encounter it as a written text, it should be borne in mind that it was originally proclaimed orally and it continues to be memorized and recited by Muslims down to the present. Direct speech is not uncommon in the Qurʾān, and the imperative “Say...,” whereby God instructs Muḥammad to say something to his followers or opponents, occurs over three hundred times (see Radscheit 1997).

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One striking feature of the Qurʾān is the pervasive sense of contrast or dualism. Izutsu (1964: 74) points out that “the Koranic Weltanschauung is...a system built on the principle of conceptual opposition,” and that this contributes to its “intense atmosphere of spiritual strain and tension”; furthermore the basic dichotomy between belief and unbelief is “the very keynote of the whole ethical system of Islam” (Izutsu 1966: 187). This striking tendency towards polarization can be observed throughout the Qurʾān, in the binary opposition between good and evil, heaven and hell, this world and the next, belief and unbelief, truth and falsehood, and so forth. The structure of Qurʾānic arguments often reflects this dualism, as the audience is constantly challenged to choose between alternatives, and notably between belief and unbelief. The preponderance of (often rhetorical) questions to which the answer would be a simple yes or no provides another example of this phenomenon: “Are the blind equal to the seeing, or the darkness to the light?” (Q 13:16); “Do you know best or does God?” (Q 2:140). The Qurʾān is replete with antonyms, antitheses, and comparisons.

Such Qurʾānic argumentation does not occur in a vacuum, but in the context of certain underlying assumptions. The larger frame of reference is a metaphysical order which includes God’s creation of humankind, the latter’s primordial acknowledgment of Him as Lord (Q 7:172), God’s subsequent communications via chosen messengers, and the future reckoning on the day of judgment. Gwynne (2004: 1) argues convincingly that these things constitute the covenant between God and humans, and that this is “the logical key to the entire structure of Qurʾānic argument,” since “virtually every argument in the Qurʾān expresses or implies one or more of the covenantal provisions.”

The Qurʾān assumes that humans are rational beings who are capable of critical thought, and open to persuasion. This is evident from the lengths to which it goes to appeal to people and persuade them. Furthermore, commands are rarely issued to the believers without giving the reason or underlying wisdom, and the Qurʾān frequently exhorts people to consider and reflect, especially on the wonders of the natural world, which are presented as signs of God’s power and beneficence; interestingly there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between faith on the one hand and understanding or intelligence on the other (Waardenburg 1980: 620ff.).

Very often, God Himself is the progenitor of an argument in the Qurʾān and thus the argument becomes an argument from authority *par excellence*, or an argument from the absolute, as Waardenburg (1980: 625) terms it. The authorial voice of the Qurʾān is privileged because it is omniscient, and is able to speak with authority not just on opponents’ arguments but on their inner thoughts and motives: “Do they not know that God knows what they conceal and what they reveal?” (Q 2:77); “Fear God, for God knows what is in your hearts” (Q 5:7). There are numerous places in the Qurʾān where God reveals people’s hidden motives or thoughts (e.g., Q 2:76; 9:107); He is also able to predict the future, as in the future projections of eschatological scenes which relate in detail conversations or interactions that have yet to take place (e.g., Q 7:44–53).

It is clear from the Qurʾān that God is utterly independent, and on a completely different level from human beings: “O humankind! It is you who need God; God is free of all need, worthy of praise” (Q 35:15; cf. 29:6; 39:7); “Nothing is like him!” (Q 42:11).

Although in His mercy He very often gives reasons for his commandments (as we have just observed), He is not accountable to human beings: “He is not to be asked about what He does” (Q 21:23). In view of God’s transcendence and uniqueness, the frequent authoritative proclamations and assertive affirmations contained in the Qur’ān almost acquire the force of argument in their own right, or at the very least significantly reinforce any argument that is being made, as will be seen in the following sections.

In the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, Qur’ānic argumentation did not become one of the branches of the Qur’ānic sciences; a possible explanation for this is that “reasoning and argument are so integral to the content of the Qur’ān and so inseparable from its structure that they in many ways shaped the very consciousness of Qur’ānic scholars” (Gwynne 2004: 203); thus the forms and idiom of Qur’ānic arguments were internalized rather than objectively studied. Only a relatively small number of works treated this as a subject in its own right, though it did attract the attention of a few prominent scholars such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), al-Tūfī (d. 716/1316), al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392), and al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1501) (McAuliffe 1999: 177 ff.; Gwynne 2004: xiii–xiv, chapters 8–9). During recent decades, however, Arabic-speaking Muslim scholars have shown renewed interest in Qur’ānic argumentation, and several monographs have appeared on the subject (see McAuliffe 1999: 164, fn. 4).

Until recently modern Western scholarship has paid relatively little attention to the actual content and message of the Qur’ān in general, let alone argumentation in particular. Several scholars such as Cragg (especially 1994), Welch (1980b, 1983), Marshall (1999), and Rahman (1980) have shown an interest in the subject but only a handful have undertaken any focused study, and that has generally been brief: Waardenburg (1980), Jomier (1997: chapter 9), and Urvoy (2002) have each devoted a chapter or an article to argumentation and persuasion. This has changed, however, with the appearance of Gwynne’s *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur’ān: God’s Arguments* (2004), which constitutes an impressive and sustained analysis of Qur’ānic argumentation, organized not thematically (as in this chapter), but on the basis of the types of argument used.

A fairly broad definition of argumentation is followed here, which includes practical as well as theoretical reasoning, and logical as well as non-rigorous persuasive reasoning (e.g., arguments from analogy, *a fortiori* arguments, etc.). The Qur’ān is deliberately couched in natural language: “We sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people so that he could make things clear to them” (Q 14:4), and although it contains many different types of argument these are not set out schematically, and are far from abstract; in fact they are often expressed in highly emotive or even polemical language, as we shall see. In view of this, a useful working definition of argumentation for the purposes of this chapter would be: providing reasons to the listener or reader for believing something to be the case, or for doing (or not doing) something. It will be helpful to bear in mind the classical distinction between logic and rhetoric: while logic concerns itself with the validity of arguments, in the sphere of rhetoric a good argument is one which is effective in convincing the audience, regardless of its deductive validity. It should also be borne in mind that a valid argument is not necessarily true, nor a fallacious one necessarily untrue.

At times it will be necessary and relevant to refer to the chronology of the Qur'ānic revelations. For example, the element of argumentation is particularly prominent from the middle to the end of the Meccan period of revelation, which was a time when the early Muslims were struggling to survive, in contrast to the Medinan period when they became empowered and were able to fight their opponents physically and not just verbally. On the whole, however, this chapter will take a synchronic approach, which takes the Qur'ān as a unified entity without reference to the chronological order of the revelations, and observes its internal dynamics; this is the approach of the ordinary religious believer who seeks guidance from the Qur'ān and who is more concerned with its content than its chronology.

Argumentation is often inseparable from other elements in the Qur'ān. Polemic is a particularly pervasive aspect of the Qur'ānic discourse (Zebiri 2004), which is full of rebukes, criticisms, threats and warnings, declarations of woe, curses, satire, irony, rhetorical questions, challenges, and so on. In addition to these, the vivid use of metaphor, imagery, and parable all make a contribution to the argumentation contained in the Qur'ān; an attempt will be made here to describe and analyze some of these stylistic elements as an intrinsic part of our subject. It would, of course, be impossible to do full justice to the theme of argumentation in the Qur'ān in a chapter of this length; readers seeking more extensive coverage should consult Gwynne (2004). Here, in order to make the material more manageable and accessible, a thematic and non-technical approach is employed, selecting those themes where argumentation is particularly explicit and developed. These tend to be the more theological/doctrinal areas, which for the purposes of this chapter are treated under the following headings: the unity of God, the authenticity of Muḥammad's prophethood, and the resurrection. Obviously this is not a comprehensive treatment but it will at least give a flavor of the Qur'ānic argumentation. First, however, we will briefly review the Qur'ān's attitude to dispute and argumentation.

Qur'ānic Attitude to Argumentation

The prevailing tone of the Qur'ān is often authoritarian in a way that does not encourage dissent. The reader who starts from the beginning of the Qur'ān will encounter this quality very quickly, as the second *sūra* opens with the words: "This is a book which is not to be doubted!" (Q 2:2). This type of self-attestation is extremely common, and often appears at the beginnings of *sūras*. The Qur'ān contains a number of terms that are semantically related to the concept of argumentation, such as disputation, evidence, proof, argument, authority, and so forth. In fact, the references to argumentation or disputation are overwhelmingly negative: "None dispute concerning the signs of God except those who disbelieve" (Q 40:4; cf. 2:197; 6:25; 8:6; see McAuliffe 1999), and the activity of disputing, or wrangling, is most often attributed to Muḥammad's opponents. Very often, as in the above example, they are portrayed as disputing over God or His signs, and those who engage in such disputation are characterized as perverse, stubborn, arrogant, and unreceptive to God's word. While one Qur'ānic verse simply laments that

“man is the most contentious of creatures!” (Q 18:54), it is clear that the unbelievers are especially guilty of contentiousness, willfully wrangling over God’s revealed truths. Thus has it always been, for the adversaries of former prophets behaved in exactly the same way, as is evident throughout the Qur’ān. One commentator observes that “there is little doubt for the Qur’ān that whereas there is such a thing as an *honest* difference of opinion, there is nevertheless very little of it” (Rahman 1980: 116; italics in original); in other words, ulterior motives often prevail.

Alongside the condemnation of disputation and wrangling one also finds, perhaps paradoxically, a certain acceptance of human disagreement and disunity as an inevitable feature of life which is not just allowed but even willed by God: “If your Lord had so willed, He could have made humankind one people; but they do not cease to differ” (Q 11:118; cf. 10:19; 16:93). Furthermore the extent to which the Qur’ān itself resorts to argument rules out any blanket condemnation of argumentation *per se*; so we may assume that it is only when arguments are employed in dishonest or inappropriate ways, or when they are not employed in the service of truth, that they are condemned. In fact, the Qur’ān prescribes a certain protocol for Muslims engaged in calling non-Muslims to the faith: “Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching and debate with them in the better way” (Q 16:125; cf. 29:46). Partly inspired by this verse, classical Muslim scholars occupied themselves with distinguishing between recommended and reprehensible debate (McAuliffe 1999: 170ff.).

God’s Unity (*Tawhīd*)

The Qur’ān frequently refers to the “unbelievers” (*kāfirūn*), but this generally denotes those who disbelieve in Muḥammad’s mission rather than in God *per se*. Given that even Muḥammad’s pagan opponents generally believed in a high God called Allāh (see, e.g., Q 10:31; 43:87), the Qur’ān mostly assumes rather than argues for the existence of God. Disbelief in God is treated as something almost incomprehensible: “How can you disbelieve in God when you were without life and He gave you life?” (Q 2:28; cf. 3:101). We have already mentioned the reciprocal relationship between faith and understanding; there is a corresponding relationship between disbelief and stupidity: “Who turns away from the religion of Abraham except the stupid?” (Q 2:130).

Although the Qur’ān generally assumes God’s existence, it is concerned to point out His uniqueness and pre-eminence, and to that end highlights His power, majesty, omniscience, and beneficence in many passages. As a result, the Qur’ān contains arguments from creation, from signs, and from providence – witness the countless references to natural phenomena: the alternation of night and day, and the sun and moon in their orbits are evidence not just of God’s existence and power, but also of His mercy and beneficence. One typically lyrical passage runs as follows:

In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sail on the ocean for the benefit of humankind; in the water which God sends down from the sky to revivify the earth when it is barren, scattering creatures of all kinds

over it; in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and the earth; here indeed are signs for a people who understand. (Q 2:164)

Much has been written on the subject of the beliefs of the Arabs of Muḥammad's day (see, e.g., Peters 1999), and the picture seems to have been quite complex; doubts have been expressed as to how seriously the pagans really took their religion. The Qur'ān tends to refer in general terms to "deities" or "that which you call on besides God," while the polytheistic pagans are referred to as "those who ascribe partners to God," and it has much to say on the subject of those partners, or deities. A common theme is their ineffectiveness: they can neither help nor harm (e.g., Q 22:12); worse, they cannot even help or harm themselves (e.g., Q 13:16); and they cannot create but are themselves created (e.g., Q 7:191). The latter verse is, of course, drawing an implicit contrast with God, a theme which is taken up elsewhere: they have no power over life or death (e.g., Q 25:3), they cannot guide to truth (Q 10:35), or answer prayer (e.g., Q 13:14).

The aforementioned implicit comparisons between the idols and God amount to an argument from the absolute. Another example of this is provided by the following:

They worship, besides God, that which can neither harm nor benefit them, and they say: "These are our intercessors with God." Say: "Are you informing God of something he doesn't know in the heavens or the earth? Glory be to Him! Far is He above the partners they ascribe to him!" (Q 10:18)

Sometimes this type of argument is used to reinforce arguments, but often, as here, it is felt to carry sufficient weight to stand alone.

The oft-repeated criticism of the pagans for preferring sons themselves while attributing daughters to God (a reference to three goddesses whom they considered to be the daughters of Allāh: al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt) sheds light on certain aspects of the Qur'ānic argumentation. The very idea that God could have offspring is denied outright (e.g., Q 37:151–2). Yet sometimes the opponents' premises may be conceded for the sake of argument, in this case producing an implicit hypothetical argument: supposing He were to have offspring, it is unreasonable of you to attribute daughters to Him and sons to yourselves. After naming the three aforementioned goddesses, the Qur'ān continues: "For you the male and for Him the female? What an unfair division!" (Q 53:21–2), reflecting the general preference for sons which was prevalent in Arabia at the time. On a superficial reading at least, the Qur'ān appears to go along with this cultural preference, but other verses seem to contain an implicit criticism of the pagans on this matter: "When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female child, his face darkens, and he is filled with gloom" (Q 16:58; cf. 43:17). The ascription of daughters to God is deemed even more inappropriate in view of the female being "one brought up among trinkets and unclear in dispute" (Q 43:18), no doubt a reference to the fact that females of the time were less versed in the art of debating than males. Here again the Qur'ānic argument is embedded in the local culture and appeals to its audience on their own grounds, accepting (at least for the sake of argument) some of their premises.

The apparent ambiguity over the status of the rival deities or partners ascribed to God provides another example of the Qur'ān's multi-pronged approach. Some verses depict the deities as conscious, living beings with the power of speech. They are portrayed, for example, as disowning their former followers on the day of judgment (e.g., Q 19:82; 10:28), and it is asserted that they have no power of intercession (e.g., Q 43:86). Other verses highlight their malignity: Abraham refers to them as "enemies" (Q 26:77), and it is stated that they will go to hell along with those who worshiped them (Q 37:22–3). Reference has already been made to verses citing their ineffectiveness and powerlessness as compared to God; they are also portrayed as having no feet, hands, eyes, or ears (Q 7:195), no doubt in order to emphasize their inferiority to human beings; the same passage describes them as "servants like you" (Q 7:194). All this still gives the impression that they are living beings of some kind. Elsewhere, however, the deities are described as "names you have invented, you and your forefathers, and for which God has sent down no authority" (Q 7:71; 12:40; 53:23); and their former worshipers are depicted on the day of judgment as realizing that what they worshiped was "nothing" (Q 40:74), giving the impression that the deities or partners have no objective reality.

A chronological view of the verses in question seems to show a progression in the portrayal of the deities in the direction of increasing powerlessness and ultimately non-existence (Welch 1980b: 739–43); this suggests a gradual, evolutionary approach which mirrors the Qur'ānic approach to legislation (e.g., the progressive restrictions on the use of alcohol). The aim would be to make the argument (or the law) more easily acceptable, on the basis that it is easier to take several small steps than one huge leap. It would be theoretically possible to reconcile these various statements by postulating that in some cases the deities were angels or *jinn*, both of which do exist in the Qur'ānic cosmology. On balance, however, it seems more likely that not all statements are intended as objective descriptions and that they serve a rhetorical purpose; the aim is not to instruct the pagans in theology but a much more concrete and practical one: that they should be convinced of the ineffectiveness and relative inferiority of their deities or idols so that they will cease to call on them and turn instead to God.

Sometimes the Qur'ān appeals to common sense or uses logical or quasi-logical arguments. A number of hypothetical arguments are of this type, for example those that draw an analogy between God's unity and earthly kingship, and point to the need for a single unified authority to ensure order: "If there were in them [the heavens and the earth] other gods besides God, there would be ruin in both" (Q 21:22; cf. 12:39). This argument is developed elsewhere: had there been other gods, "each god would have taken away what he had created, and each would have tried to overcome the others" (Q 23:91; cf. 17:42). The deductive reasoning in these verses leads to the conclusion that since the universe is not in chaos, it must have a single Lord. Elsewhere there is an appeal to the individual, along the lines that it is better to serve one master than many who are at variance with one another (Q 39:29).

The pagans do not seem to have any reasoned defense of polytheism (with the possible exception of the appeal to God's will as in Q 6:148 – see next paragraph), but merely repeat that they are following the way of their forefathers. They even concede the argument at times, their appeal to the forefathers sounding decidedly lame; when

asked concerning their idols: “Do they hear you when you call, or do you good or harm?,” Abraham’s contemporaries are depicted as replying: “No, but we found our forefathers doing that” (Q 26:72–4; cf. 21:53).

Not infrequently there is an *ad hominem* element to the arguments employed against Muḥammad’s opponents. The pagans are depicted as fickle and irrational: when they are lost at sea, they call upon God, but when they are safe on dry land they revert to their idols (Q 29:65; cf. 6:63–4; 17:67). The attribution of daughters to God and sons to themselves is further evidence of their inconsistency and unreasonableness, while their insistence on sticking to the ways of their forefathers makes them appear stubborn and mindlessly conservative. One particular argument employed by the pagans is simply condemned as false and baseless, while the pagans themselves are depicted as dishonest and disingenuous:

Those who ascribe partners to God will say: “If God had willed, we would not have ascribed partners to him nor would our forefathers....” In this way their ancestors denied the truth, until they tasted our wrath. Say: “Have you any knowledge? If so, produce it for us. You follow nothing but conjecture; you do nothing but lie.” (Q 6:148; cf. 16:35; 43:20)

Elsewhere the pagans are simply called “liars” (e.g., Q 37:152).

The tone of the Qur’ān on the subject of the “partners” ascribed to God is often cajoling or challenging, with frequent rhetorical questions and imperatives: “Do they have feet to walk with or hands to strike with, or eyes to see with or ears to hear with? Say: ‘Call upon your partners and scheme against me, and give me no respite!’” (Q 7:195). At other times the tone is heavy with irony, if not sarcasm:

Those on whom you call besides God cannot create a fly, even if they were to all collaborate, and if the fly should take something away from them they would have no power to get it back. (Q 22:73)

Or do they ascribe to God partners who have created as He has created, so that the creation seemed to them similar? Say: “God is the Creator of all things.” (Q 13:16)

It was not just the pagans who were guilty of associating partners with God; the Muslims also came into contact with Christians, some of whose beliefs were felt to violate the divine unity. Christian doctrines such as the Sonship of Jesus, which are seen as detracting from God’s unity, are given fairly short shrift. It should be mentioned here that although some of the arguments against God having a son were probably originally directed at pagans, they were subsequently used in anti-Christian polemic. The rhetorical question: “How can He have a son when He has no spouse?” (Q 6:101) provides a good illustration of the Qur’ān’s preference for the concrete over the abstract. Elsewhere Muḥammad is told to say: “If the Most Merciful had a son, I’d be the first to worship him” (Q 43:81); if we add the implied conclusion: I am not worshiping him, therefore the Most Merciful does not have a son, this is recognizable as a form of argument acknowledged as valid by logicians (denying the consequent, or *modus tollens*). Attributing a son to God is portrayed as not only

baseless (“a mere saying from their mouth”), but also an unthinking imitation of the unbelievers of old (Q 9:30, which interestingly attributes this characteristic not just to Christians but also to Jews). As is frequently the case, the argument from the absolute is much in evidence: “Far be it from Him to have a son!” (Q 4:171; cf. 2:116).

On the subject of Jesus’ alleged divinity, the Qur’ān states that he and his mother “used to eat food” (Q 5:75), an argument which, like the consort argument mentioned above, would be unlikely to appeal to Christians, almost none of whom have denied the fact of Jesus’ humanity. Yet from the point of view of Islamic belief, which holds humanity and divinity to be mutually exclusive, the argument is conclusive. One verse (Q 3:59) refutes the idea that Jesus’ creation through extraordinary means (the virgin birth is acknowledged in the Qur’ān) constitutes evidence of his suprahuman status by pointing out the parallel with Adam, who also came into being without a human father. Unlike the previous argument, this one is based on premises accepted by Christians; however, it only establishes the possibility as opposed to the necessity of the non-divinity of Jesus, and Christians have other premises on which they base the argument for Jesus’ divinity. As far as the Trinity is concerned, scholars have differed as to whether the Qur’ān refutes the Trinity as such or a perversion of it that may have been current in Muḥammad’s day (Zebiri 1997: 17). Whatever the case, the portrayal of Christian belief by the words: “God is the third of three” (Q 5:73) may well be polemical (and thus a straw man) rather than an accurate portrayal of what Muḥammad’s contemporaries actually believed. As usual the Qur’ān is less concerned with theological niceties than with making the point that Trinitarian belief (probably of any variety) is incompatible with God’s majesty and pre-eminence.

Authenticity of Muḥammad’s Prophethood

This is possibly the richest of the three chosen themes in terms of argument and counterargument due to the multiplicity of accusations and challenges that were directed at Muḥammad by his adversaries. Here it should be noted that the stories of past prophets (material which accounts for approximately one quarter of the Qur’ān) are pertinent; although these stories ostensibly refer to events in the distant past, the arguments which took place between former prophets and their peoples are very much an integrated part of the Qur’ānic discourse and are usually of direct relevance to Muḥammad’s own situation (see, e.g., Robinson 1996: 156).

Muḥammad seems to have been bombarded with accusations, particularly in Mecca but also in the early Medinan phase: that, far from being a prophet, he was a poet, a sorcerer, a soothsayer, or he was mad or possessed by *jinn* (see respectively Q 52:30; 43:30; 69:42; 23:25). As for the revelation, it was a forgery, and nothing but old stories or fairy tales, or confused dreams (see respectively Q 42:24; 25:5; 21:5). Muḥammad was also accused of having human informants who dictated or taught this material to him (Q 16:103; 25:4–5).

The replies to these accusations often take the form of simple denials, or affirmations of Muḥammad's true status. Some of the earliest responses incorporate oaths: "I swear by what you see and by what you do not see, truly this is the word of a noble messenger, it is not the word of a poet...nor is it the word of a soothsayer...but a message sent down from the Lord of the worlds" (Q 69:38–43). Alternatively, there may be counteraccusations: "In truth it is they who have put forward an iniquity and a falsehood" (Q 25:4), condemnation: "They have gone astray, and they will never be able to find a way!" (Q 25:9), or threats, such as the frequent reminders of the destruction that was visited on unbelievers of old (e.g., Q 21:6).

Some of the opponents' arguments are more personal, or *ad hominem*: Muḥammad's relative lack of social status is held against him ("Why was this Qur'ān not sent down on some important man from the two cities [i.e., Mecca and Medina]?" Q 43:31). Similar charges were made against former prophets: Moses was impugned for being unclear of speech (Q 43:52), and for being from a dispossessed minority (Q 23:47), and the objection of Noah's opponents, that his followers were from the lowest strata of society (Q 11:27), could easily have been directed against Muḥammad. The Qur'ān counters by appealing to Muḥammad's good character, as where he is instructed to say: "A whole lifetime before this have I been among you: will you not then understand?" (Q 10:16).

One of the common objections both to Muḥammad and to former prophets was the fact of his humanity; the Qur'ān portrays the unbelievers as asking: "Is this more than a man like yourselves?" (Q 21:3), or: "What sort of messenger is this, who eats food, and walks about in the market places?" (Q 25:7). Muḥammad, for his part, is instructed at various times to say: "I am only a human being like you" (Q 18:110, 41:6), or "I don't say that I have treasures, nor do I claim to know the unseen, or that I'm an angel. I only follow what is revealed to me" (Q 6:50; cf. 11:31). The Qur'ān points out that the same objection was raised with former prophets, who replied: "We are only human like you... we come with no authority save by the leave of God" (Q 14:11). In effect, the opponents' arguments are undermined by the fact that Muḥammad never claims to be more than a human being. In similar vein the unbelievers ask why an angel is not sent down, presumably with the revelation (e.g., Q 6:8; 25:7), to which the Qur'ān gives a common-sense reply: that an angel would be sent only if the message were directed at angels (Q 17:95), or that an angel would have been sent in the form of a man anyway (Q 6:9) – presumably in order to be visible and comprehensible to humans.

In the late Meccan and early Medinan periods in particular, Muḥammad's detractors repeatedly ask for a miracle or "sign" to substantiate his prophetic status. One extended passage gives a flavor of these demands:

They say: "We shall not believe in you until you make a spring gush forth for us out of the earth, or until you have a garden of date trees and vines, and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst, or you cause the sky to fall in pieces...or you bring God and the angels before us face to face, or you have a house made of gold, or you rise up into the sky, and we won't believe in your ascension until you send down to us a book that we can read." [To this, Muḥammad is told to reply:] "Glory be to my Lord! Am I anything but a man, a messenger?" (Q 17:90–3)

As with the fact of Muḥammad's humanity, his opponents' arguments are met with a simple disclaimer or disavowal.

The Qur'ān describes a number of supernatural events in connection with past prophets, and both Jesus and Moses are depicted as performing miracles in the Qur'ān (e.g., Q 3:49; 7:107–8), although it is made clear that this was only with God's permission (Q 13:38). While the Qur'ān is clear that God is able to do all things, it seems that He declines to effect miracles through Muḥammad for various reasons: because the opponents still would not believe (e.g., Q 6:7; 6:109; 54:2); because their punishment would be hastened if they still disbelieved after receiving such a sign (Q 6:8); in order to emphasize Muḥammad's human status (e.g., Q 17:93); and because the Qur'ān should be sufficient for them – in fact, it is hinted that the Qur'ān itself is such a sign (Q 29:50–1). Muslims have traditionally linked the latter theme with the phenomenon of the “challenge” contained in several Qur'ānic passages (e.g., Q 2:23–4; 10:38) which call on Muḥammad's critics to produce something comparable to the Qur'ān. Their apparent failure to do so has been taken as evidence of the Qur'ān's miraculous nature, or inimitability (*i'jāz*).

One aspect of the Qur'ānic discourse which emerges particularly clearly in this context is the triangular dynamic between God, Muḥammad, and the unbelievers. This illustrates the fluidity and multivocality of the Qur'ān; although God is the ostensible author throughout, there are frequent shifts in operative voice and addressee. Often, particularly in the Meccan revelations, God addresses Muḥammad, sometimes offering reassurance: “You are not, by the grace of your Lord, a soothsayer, nor are you possessed” (Q 52:29; cf. 68:2). At other times He seems to admonish Muḥammad: “If their rejection is difficult for you, if you can, seek to make a tunnel in the earth or a ladder to the sky and bring them a sign. If God willed, he could bring them together to guidance; so be not among the ignorant” (Q 6:35).

On the occasions when God tells Muḥammad what to say, sometimes the recommended speech or dictum takes the form of a disclaimer: “Say: ‘If I've forged it, I'll pay for my crime; but I'm innocent of the crimes you commit’” (Q 11:35). God is to be called upon as witness or arbiter: “Say: ‘If I had forged it, you would have no power to help me against God...He is sufficient as a witness between me and you’” (Q 46:8). When the pagans ask Muḥammad to change the revelation, he is instructed to say: “If I disobey God, I fear the punishment of a great day” (Q 10:15). The frequent references to the possibility of Muḥammad's punishment have a certain persuasive effect which is brought out more clearly in another Qur'ānic passage. A secret believer seeks to persuade Pharaoh to believe in Moses by pointing out that he has nothing to lose and something to gain by so doing: if Moses is lying, then he bears the responsibility for (and presumably will suffer the consequences of) his own lie, but if he is telling the truth, then Pharaoh can expect to be punished himself if he disbelieves it (Q 40:28). This sets up what the classical logicians called a false dilemma (reducing the options to two, diametrically opposed alternatives): either Muḥammad will be punished or his adversaries will be.

Not infrequently the unbelievers are addressed directly, and Muḥammad is spoken of in the third person: “Your companion is neither astray nor deluded; nor does he speak from his own desire” (Q 53:2–3). In what seems to be a paradoxical twist, in the face of the unbelievers' accusations the threat occasionally appears to be directed at Muḥammad rather

than at the unbelievers: “Had he invented against us any sayings, we would have seized him by the right hand, then we would have cut his life-vein and none of you could have defended him” (Q 69:44–7). This powerful image constitutes an appeal to force, engaging the emotions rather than the rational faculties. Yet the argument is not ineffective: the fact that Muḥammad remains unharmed is a silent testimony to his authenticity.

The effect of these rhetorical elements is quite striking. A dramatic tension is set up between the various parties – in this case God, Muḥammad, and the unbelievers, which has the effect of presenting God as a real presence and an effective actor. He appears in many guises/roles: as comforter and supporter of Muḥammad; as witness and arbiter; as admonisher of Muḥammad; and, perhaps most often, as potential chastiser of Muḥammad’s opponents. The objectification of Muḥammad when he is spoken of in the third person conveys a sense of detachment and objectivity, enhancing Muḥammad’s credibility as conveyor of a transcendent message. The dissociation between God and Muḥammad has the same effect, as do the frequent disclaimers which in effect refer the detractors to a higher authority. Interestingly this dissociation becomes much less marked in the later Medinan years, when Muḥammad becomes more powerful; for example, in that phase the Qur’ān frequently exhorts people to obey or believe in both God and His messenger (Welch 1983: 38).

Resurrection

One element of the new message seems to have drawn much scorn from the Meccan pagans, namely the idea of the final reckoning in general, and bodily resurrection in particular. They especially focused on the latter, which they found quite incredible; there are literally dozens of verses devoted to this subject, with the pagans expressing their objections and the Qur’ān often furnishing a reply.

The incredulity of the Meccans is often graphically depicted, focusing on the physical aspects: “Who will make these bones live when they’re decayed?” (Q 36:78). “What! When we die and become dust and bones will we be raised up again, and also our forefathers?” (Q 37:16–17). At other times they are more philosophical: “There is only our life in this world...nothing but time can destroy us” (Q 45:24). The Qur’ānic replies to the pagan objections combine various elements: appeals to reason, arguments from nature, assertive affirmations, appeals to God’s power, impugning the opposition, and threats.

By far the most common response in the Qur’ān is that since God was able to create the earth and all that is in it in the first place, then he must have the power to recreate it if He so desires. This constitutes an *a fortiori* argument to the effect that if God can create something out of nothing, then it should be even easier for Him to create something out of something. This would be a particularly effective argument given that the pagans seem to have believed that God (i.e., Allāh) was in fact the creator (see, e.g., Q 29:61). The following is a characteristically eloquent passage:

O people! If you are in doubt concerning the resurrection, consider that We created you out of dust, then out of a drop of fluid, then out of a clot, then out of a piece of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed. (Q 22:5)

The many passages in the Qur'ān which draw attention to the marvels of nature often come in connection with this theme (e.g., Q 50:3–11). At times there is a lyrical, rhythmical quality which comes across even in translation: “Out of it [the earth] We created you and into it We shall make you return and from it We will bring you out another time” (Q 20:55; cf. 71:17–18); despite the fact that technically speaking this amounts to nothing more than an assertion, the cyclical element conveys a sense of inevitability which is highly persuasive.

Added force is given to the argument when God insists that the initial act of creation did not tire Him: “Were we wearied by the first creation? Yet they are in doubt about a new creation” (Q 50:15; cf. 46:33). Furthermore, it is implied that the second creation is even easier than the first (Q 29:19; 30:27), and one verse which responds to the pagans' incredulity makes the *a fortiori* argument even more explicit: “Say: ‘Even if you were stones or iron, or any created matter which in your minds is hard [to be raised up]’” (Q 17:50–1). As is common in the Qur'ān, it is left to the listener to complete the thought; letting the opponent draw his or her own conclusions can be quite an effective strategy in argument.

It is not only the physical act of resurrection which the pagans find unbelievable but also the final reckoning which is promised, or threatened, in the Qur'ān. The two themes – resurrection and accountability – are closely related. Since the resurrection is a prerequisite for the accounting in the Qur'ānic order, to argue for the accounting is in effect to argue for the resurrection. The Qur'ān contains many future projections of dramatic eschatological scenes, and in some of them there is reference to the first-second creation topos, as where God addresses the assembled ranks of the resurrected: “You have come to Us as We created you the first time, though you claimed that We had not made this appointment with you” (Q 18:48; cf. 6:94). Other verses simply allude to the purposiveness of the creation as an argument in support of the resurrection: “Did you think We had created you in vain and that you would not be returned to Us?” (Q 23:115; cf. 75:36).

Apart from their incredulity the pagans do not bring forth any serious arguments against the resurrection, but place the burden of proof on Muḥammad. The Qur'ān is not impressed by their arguments: “And when our clear signs are related to them, their only argument is: ‘Bring back our forefathers, if you are telling the truth!’” (Q 45:25; cf. 44:36). The Qur'ān's reply to this challenge is a simple but powerful assertion: “Say: ‘It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; then He will gather you together for the day of resurrection about which there is no doubt,’ but most people do not know” (Q 45:26). Frequently the Qur'ān simply dismisses Muḥammad's adversaries with a laconic phrase such as: “They have no knowledge of that, they are only guessing” (Q 45:24).

The Qur'ān often urges its listeners to test its claims through their own observation, as in the arguments from nature. For example, an analogy is made between resurrection and the quickening or revivification of the earth by the rain:

You see the earth lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred to life, it swells, and it produces every kind of beautiful growth...It is He who gives life to the dead, and it is He who has power over all things.” (Q 22:5–6; cf. 30:50)

While such verses appear to constitute an appeal to empirical evidence, they are perhaps more accurately to be understood as metaphors; the same could be said of some of the many verses beginning: “Travel through the land and see....” One passage draws attention to the way in which nature is constantly renewed:

Do they not see how God originates creation, then repeats it; truly that is easy for God. Say: “Travel through the land and see how He originated creation; so will God produce a later creation, for God has power over all things.” (Q 29:19–20)

More generally, however, the command to “travel through the land and see” is part of an appeal to force, alluding to the fate that awaits the pagans if they continue to disbelieve in the message that is being conveyed to them. In these cases the intention presumably is indeed to cite empirical evidence (thus constituting an argument from demonstration), for the unbelievers are being asked to witness the ruins of the towns and cities of peoples who were destroyed in the past for their disobedience and recalcitrance (e.g., Q 27:67–9; such passages are often warning against unbelief in general rather than disbelief in the resurrection in particular). It is frequently pointed out that those earlier nations were more powerful than the Meccans (e.g., Q 19:74; 44:37; 50:36), constituting an *a fortiori* argument to the effect that if God could destroy them, it would be even easier for Him to destroy the Meccans.

Threats are a prominent element of the Qur’ānic rhetoric, and are much in evidence on this subject. When the Meccans ask: “When will this promise come true?” the succinct reply is: “They’ll only have to wait for a single blast!” (Q 36:48–9). In one passage the person who expresses incredulity about being raised up is quickly and graphically reminded of the punishment of hell (Q 19:66–71); in another a doubter asks rhetorically: “Shall we be raised up, and also our forefathers?,” and Muḥammad is told to retort: “Yes, and you will be humiliated!” (Q 37:16–18).

Ultimately, God is able to do anything, and the theme of God’s power is closely interwoven with arguments for the resurrection: “If He wills, He can remove you all and replace you with a new creation” (Q 14:19; 35:16). In reply to the question: “Who can give life to decayed bones?” (Q 36:78), the Qur’ān answers with a passage referring to the first creation and to God’s power to produce fire from trees, and concludes: “Indeed when He intends a thing He only has to say ‘Be’ and it is! So glory be to Him in whose hands is the dominion of all things; and to Him you will all be returned” (Q 36:82–3). In a sense, the resurrection is the ultimate manifestation of God’s power in nature.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Qur’ān has a rich repertoire of forms and types of argument, though the preference for the concrete and the practical over the abstract and the theoretical is everywhere in evidence. Generally speaking the Qur’ānic argumentation falls within the domain of rhetoric and persuasion rather than strict logic (although it does contain some logical arguments, as we have seen). Aristotle himself acknowledged the limitations of rational discourse, and maintained that effective communication required not

just an ability to argue logically but also an understanding of human character and emotions (Edmondson 1984: 18, fn. 47). The Qur'ānic arguments are enhanced by many elements which are not considered valid in terms of pure logic, such as appeals to emotion and the appeal to the absolute. One would not expect it to be otherwise in a book which speaks in the natural language of everyday speech, the more so when we consider that this is scripture. In a religious context, one could argue that an appeal to the heart is as important as the appeal to the mind, if not more so.

If persuasion is much more than a matter of mere logic, one needs to go beyond logic in order to fully appreciate the Qur'ānic argumentation, and one needs to acknowledge that what the Qur'ān says is inseparable from how it says it. For example, when reporting the arguments of its opponents, the Qur'ān may simultaneously discredit those opponents by (sometimes quite casually) referring to them as “wrongdoers” (Q 21:3) or “liars” (Q 37:152). The subtle psychological nuances can easily be missed. For example, the accusation of forgery at one time brings the response: “If God wills, He will seal up your [i.e., Muḥammad’s] heart” (Q 42:24). The listener’s attention is thus drawn to the possible cessation of revelation while the underlying implication that the revelation comes from God may go unnoticed, and so be the more readily accepted. Such methods, where the argumentation operates on a subliminal level, may well be a match for those contained in contemporary manuals on the art of persuasion. Muslims have long held the view that the Qur'ān is composed with a supreme eloquence in order to convey its message in the most effective possible way, and that therein lies its inimitability; the persuasive elements which are described here could easily be seen as one aspect of this (in fact the classical commentators, such as al-Zamakhsharī [d. 538/1144], did occasionally draw attention to the Qur'ān’s psychological appeal).

More fundamentally, it has been suggested that the Qur'ān as a whole purveys a worldview which, in its consistency and eloquence, is quite compelling. Once the listener begins to enter into that worldview, he or she is inducted into a “thought system” which on its own terms makes perfect sense and whose various elements can be easily accepted (Waardenburg 1980: 631; the Qur'ān’s gradualist approach, sometimes conceding its opponents’ premises or meeting them on their own ground, would certainly help the process of induction). This may help to account for the efficacy of certain arguments even when they may appear unconvincing to unbelievers, based as they are on premises which are not yet fully accepted by them.

The arguments in the Qur'ān are overwhelmingly between the forces of good (God, Muḥammad, believers, past prophets) and the forces that – at least for the time being – set themselves up in opposition to God and His messengers (there are exceptions: at times the believers and even Muḥammad himself are the target of God’s arguments). Interestingly, one often finds the same types of argument on both sides: both God and the pagans resort to *ad hominem* arguments, and periodically issue challenges. Thus accusations of lying abound on both sides, and the opponents’ challenges to Muḥammad to hasten their punishment or bring back their forefathers are mirrored in the Qur'ān’s challenges to them to produce a comparable piece of scripture, or to produce proof of what they say. While Muḥammad cites God’s will in his arguments (e.g., Q 10:16), his adversaries do the same (e.g., Q 6:148), albeit with questionable sincerity.

However, certain types of argument apply only to the divine – the argument from the absolute being an obvious example, which may be broadly seen as incorporating assertive affirmations and denials, appeals to force, future projections (mainly of eschatological scenes) as well as any other elements requiring omniscience (such as revealing the secret thoughts of the opponents). Such arguments may seem like preaching to the converted, to those who are already convinced of God’s omnipotence, and indeed they may be partly aimed at wavering or newly converted Muslims; but bearing in mind the pagans’ belief in a High God called Allāh, such verses might well have a cumulative effect in reinforcing His pre-eminence. Jews and Christians, of course, already believed in a pre-eminent God, so they could be appealed to on the basis of this common ground.

Since the lines between the two opposing camps are often so clearly drawn, there is never any doubt as to the right and wrong of any argument. When it comes to argumentative techniques the arsenal available to God seems to outweigh that of Muḥammad’s detractors, and an argument between two sides where one side knows the secret thoughts of the other is of course an unequal encounter. It would be fair to say that the more persuasive arguments in terms of reasoning as well as expression are those which issue from God, and the opponents’ arguments often appear rather lame by comparison (although interestingly, they appear to be rather more inventive in impugning Muḥammad than on the more strictly doctrinal issues of the unity of God and the resurrection). Finally, there is no doubt as to who will eventually prevail, and who has the last word. The Qur’ān warns the listener that all disputes will be settled in the hereafter when God will decide between the contenders: “He will certainly make clear to you on the day of resurrection those things about which you disagreed” (Q 16:92).

Further reading

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CHAPTER 22

Knowing and Thinking

A. H. Mathias Zahniser

Embossed in beautiful Arabic calligraphy on the glass doorway to the Cambridge University Divinity School, among quotations from others of the world's scriptures in their languages of revelation, is the Qur'ānic phrase, *wa-fawqa kulli dhī 'ilmīn 'alīmun*, "and above every possessor of knowledge is a knower" (Q 12:76). Popular and classical commentators agree on the verse's meaning: "Above every creature who knows, there is someone more knowledgeable – until you end up at God" (e.g., al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī 1952). In other words, God is the ultimate knower.

Divine and Human Knowledge in the Qur'ān

Franz Rosenthal (1970: 1–2), in a detailed discussion of the Qur'ānic root *'l-m*, concludes that "no other concept," not even *tawḥīd* or *dīn*, "has been operative as a determinant of Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same extent as *'ilm*." Words for knowledge from this root make up 1 percent of the words in the Qur'ān. Except for words from the roots *k-w-n*, "being," and *q-w-l*, "saying," the only words occurring more times than words for knowledge from the root *'l-m* are *Allāh* and *Rabb*.

Divine Knowing and Teaching

'Alīm, meaning "a knower," "a learned one," "a sage," occurs 161 times in the singular. In all but eight of these God is the *'alīm* referred to. The exceptions include Moses, according to Pharaoh's leaders (Q 7:109; 26:34); Pharaoh's sorcerers (Q 7:112; 10:79);

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Joseph (Q 12:55); and the unborn son of Abraham (Q 15:53; 51:28). With the exception of Abraham's son, designated *'alīm* by angelic prophesy, all these "knowers" have been able to do something supernatural. The plural, *'ulamā'*, occurs twice: Q 26:197 refers to "the learned of the Children of Israel," and Q 35:28 says, "Those among His servants who have knowledge fear Allāh."

God as Knower

Overwhelmingly, however, that is in 94 percent of its occurrences, the Qur'ān uses *'alīm* for God. Furthermore, all of the occurrences of *'alīm* in reference to God occur in the rhyme phrase of a verse. Angelika Neuwirth (1980: 148–52) and Neal Robinson (1996: 200–1) have demonstrated the significance of these rhyme phrases for the impact of the Qur'ān on its receptors. Rhyme phrases reinforce the content of the verse or verse groups that they climax, provide motivation for adopting the truth or duty that their verses or verse groups advocate, and reinforce the worldview of the Qur'ān in general. The rhyme phrases containing epithets of God as Knower reinforce the Qur'ānic emphasis on God as the source of true knowledge.

The divine name *'alīm* occurs in rhyme phrases 154 times. In a little more than half of these, it occurs in tandem with another name, sometimes also related to knowing. Other divine names, such as Hearer (47 times), Seer (42 times), Witness (16 times), and Well-informed (44 times), also occur in rhyme phrases and relate closely to Knower. According to Robinson (1996: 200), who arranges the divine names in clusters around seven divine attributes, the names clustered around God as omniscient occur 394 times. Omnipotence, the next most numerous cluster, has 133 occurrences. These rhyme phrases powerfully reinforce the Qur'ānic emphasis on God as Knower. For example, an elaborate analogy for God, called the "verse of light," climaxes with these statements: "Light upon light! Allāh guides whom He will to His light. Allāh creates parables for humankind. In everything Allāh is Knower" (Q 24:35).

All of the names of God related to knowing are either words that have to do with God's perception, for example, Seer or Hearer, or words that express the intensity and quality of God's knowledge, such as Well-informed or Wise. The many words for the processes of human knowing that we will examine below are not involved in divine knowing. God simply perceives with perfect perception and knows with depth and comprehensiveness. He does not come to knowledge; He knows. God possesses "Complete and Absolute Knowledge" (Choudhury 2001: 94), although He does not possess knowledge of all future human acts so as to determine them (Rahbar 1960: 53–66). Humans, in contrast, must consider, reflect, remember, and come to understand. Yet both divine and human knowing can be described by words from the root *'l-m*.

In 298 verses, the Qur'ān uses a word from the root *'l-m* for God's knowledge or knowing. A significant verse for God's nature and knowledge is Q 2:255:

Allāh! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there that can intercede in His

presence save by His permission? He knows what lies before and after them [unbelievers]. Nor shall they encompass any of His knowledge except as He wills.

The knowledge of God is fleshed out in many verses of the Qurʾān: God knows well what people do and what they do not do (Q 16:28); what they do openly and what they do in secret (Q 2:33); when they move about and when they stay at home (Q 47:19); what the righteous do, what the unrighteous do, and who the hypocrites are (Q 29:3, 11). God knows who have gone astray and who are rightly guided, who bring right guidance and who lead others astray (Q 28:85); and, on the basis of knowledge, God leads some astray (Q 45:23). God knows the interpretation of the scripture and the interpretation of dreams (Q 3:7; 12:101). God knows all that is in heaven and on earth – including the mysteries of both – and what has been recorded (Q 22:70; 25:6). God knows the processes of non-human life (Q 34:2; 57:4). He knows the hour of judgment and its rewards and punishments (Q 7:187; 31:34). God neither errs nor forgets and at the Judgment “will tell you everything you ever did” (Q 39:7). The Qurʾān assures receptors that God knows even their doubts and misgivings: “We have created humankind, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him, for We are nearer to him than the jugular vein” (Q 50:16).

Muḥammad is also assured that God’s comprehensive and intimate knowledge extends to the secrets held among people. “No three persons consult secretly but He is the fourth among them, nor between five but He makes the sixth....Then, on the day of judgment, He will tell them the truth of their conduct. Allāh in all things is Knower” (Q 58:7). God’s knowing not only inspires respect for the judgment, designed to lead to amendment of life; it also offers comfort for the living of life:

Allāh determines the measure of night and day. Knowing you are unable to calculate it, He has relented towards you. Read, therefore, of the Qurʾān as much as may be easy for you. He knows some of you will be sick, others traveling through the land, seeking Allāh’s bounty, and others fighting in Allāh’s cause. (Q 73:20)

The intimacy of God’s knowledge extends to the fall of a leaf or the birth of a child: “Not a leaf falls without His knowledge” (Q 6:59); “Allāh created you from dust; then from a sperm-drop; then He made you in pairs. No female conceives, or gives birth, without His knowledge” (Q 35:11; 41:47).

Does God learn? One who is omniscient could hardly learn or be taught: “What! will you teach Allāh about your religion, when Allāh *knows* all that is in the heavens and the earth?” (Q 49:16). Some verses, however, lead one to believe God learns: “What you suffered on the day the two armies met, was by Allāh’s permission, in order that He might know the believers” (Q 3:166). God roused the men who had slept sealed in a cave for a very long time “in order to *know* which of the two parties best accounted for the period they had stayed” in the cave (Q 18:12). It is God who would know the best of the two parties and not the parties themselves. Similar passages include Q 3:140, 5:94, 34:21, and 57:25. Commentators consistently deny that God learns; Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1997: 167, n. 467) comments on Q 3:154 where the word “test” is explicit: “Testing by

Allāh is not in order that it may add to His knowledge, for He knows all. It is in order to help us subjectively, to mould our will, and purge us of any grosser motives, that will be searched out by calamity.” If God as learner can be questioned, God as teacher cannot.

God as Teacher

At least forty-one verses indicate God teaches. One of the clearest has God teaching humans so they can teach their domestic animals. Muḥammad is told to say, “All clean things are lawful for you and what trained hunting animals take for you, as you have taught them from what Allāh taught you” (Q 5:4). God teaches knowledge (Q 18:65–6), the Qur’ān, and self-expression (Q 55:1–4).

God taught Adam as well as the angels. “And He taught Adam the names of all things; then placed them before the angels, and said: ‘Tell Me the names of these if you are truthful.’ They said: ‘Glory to You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Truly You are the Wise Knower’” (Q 2:31–2).

The Qur’ān has God teaching Lot (Q 21:74), Joseph (Q 12:21, 101), Moses (Q 28:14), al-Khiḍr (according to the commentaries) (Q 18:65), David (Q 2:251), Solomon (Q 21:79), Jesus (Q 3:48), and Muḥammad (Q 4:113). God taught scribes to write (Q 2:282). The Qur’ān mentions those who were given knowledge (*ūtū l-‘ilm*) and have come to believe (Q 17:107; 22:54).

While only words from the root *‘-l-m* are used for divine knowing, divine “teaching” can be expressed by other roots: *adrā*, “to make known” (Q 10:16); *‘arrafa*, “to cause to recognize” (Q 66:3); *faṣṣala*, “to explain in detail” (Q 6:126); *fahhama*, “to cause to understand” (Q 21:79); and *amadda*, “to bestow” (Q 26:132). One could even justify adding to the list *ḍaraba*, “to formulate [a parable]” (Q 24:35), and *hadā*, “to guide” (Q 4:175).

The thoroughness of the Qur’ānic depiction of divine knowing and teaching should prepare us for discovering that humans learn by sharing in what God knows. When we turn to what the Qur’ān has to say about human knowing, however, we find a rich vocabulary describing the processes of human learning from perception to cognition to understanding and, finally, coming full circle again to knowledge (*‘ilm*).

Human Knowing as Perception, Cognition, and Understanding

Human thinking, reflecting, perceiving, and evaluating take place, according to the Qur’ān, in the *qalb*, the *lubb* (found only in the plural), the *ṣadr*, the *fu’ād*, and the *nafs* – all of which have been translated as “heart” by standard English translations. In accordance with normative Semitic culture, the heart is “the organ of perception and understanding” (Kermani 2002: 547), and so these terms sometimes get translated “mind” (e.g., A. Yusuf Ali 1997 on Q 20:67 and 26:194). The Qur’ān never uses the word *‘aql*, “reason, comprehension, mind, intellect.” As we shall see, however, the basic verb from the same root is very fruitful for representing a dimension of human knowing.

Daniel Madigan (2001: 149–50) charts out the Qur’ān’s “extraordinarily varied vocabulary” related to knowledge. He includes in a table “all those words to do with perception, knowledge, understanding, clarity, and truth,” as well as their antonyms, such as “doubt, argument, ignorance, and forgetfulness.” Of the thirty words in his positive list, only sixteen receive attention in this chapter. Of his eighteen antonyms, we deal with only two, *ẓanna*, “to surmise,” and *za’ama*, “to claim.”

The Qur’ān features no systematic discussion of human knowing. A grasp of its view of the subject, therefore, requires careful and thorough contextual study of its rich vocabulary. The categories established in this study – supposition, perception, cognition, and knowing – are for heuristic purposes only and do not imply that the Qur’ān itself conforms to these categories. I begin with supposition and assertion.

Supposition and Assertion

Words from the root *z-n-n* normally refer to “supposition”: a thought or surmise that originates with the person thinking. “Supposition” may have a positive meaning in some contexts. For example, a divorced couple wishing to remarry may do so after the woman has been remarried and divorced, as long as they both “suppose” they can keep God’s laws (Q 2:230). Such thoughts or convictions originating from the person, however, normally turn out to be wrong. For example, those who give female names to angels “have no knowledge (*‘ilm*) about it. They follow only supposition and supposition cannot replace the truth” (Q 53:28).

The root *h-s-b*, meaning “to consider, have an opinion, reckon, or imagine,” also originates from persons in a similar way. For example, the community at Medina spread rumors about something they had no knowledge (*‘ilm*) of, considering it “a light matter, while it was most serious in the sight of Allāh” (Q 24:15). With one possible exception (Q 18:9), all forty-eight occurrences of this root refer to erroneous considerations or imaginings.

Words from the root *z-‘-m* refer to claims or assertions originating from persons. For example, the Qur’ān reveals that on the day of judgment God will ask those who believed in more than one God, “Where are the partners you asserted?” (Q 6:22). All fifteen occurrences refer to erroneous assertions. We turn now to a set of words for perception, another dimension of human knowing.

Perception: Seeing, Hearing, Awareness, and Recognition

Words from the roots *b-ṣ-r* and *s-m-‘* refer to seeing and hearing, obvious dimensions of perception. Most of the many instances of these sensory words are literal, but many are figurative and refer to openness to the truth of what is heard or – with a negative modifier – dismissal of that truth. Just as God may grant knowledge to humans, so also God may veil the seeing and hearing of individuals, preventing them from grasping the truth (Q 2:7; 6:25).

Two other roots, *sh-ʿ-r* and *ʿ-r-f*, move from seeing and hearing in the direction of knowing, but with the nuances of “awareness” and “recognition.” Eliminating words from the root *sh-ʿ-r* that do not relate to knowing, we find twenty-seven occurrences. All but two are negative. That is, they refer to the subjects as unaware of something. An obvious example comes from the narrative where Moses’ sister watches him from a distance while the Egyptians are unaware (Q 28:11). At least fourteen times unbelievers are unaware of what awaits them in the next life (e.g., Q 16:21, 26, 45). The root *ʿ-r-f* carries with it the connotation of “recognition,” especially of recognizing some object that one has known before. The People of the Book, for example, weep when they listen to the Qurʾān because on the basis of their scriptures “they recognize the truth” (Q 5:83). I move now from perception to cognition, the more active dimension of human knowing.

Cognition: Recollection, Reflection, and Understanding

Several roots supply words describing the many nuances of thinking or cognition, the activity of the heart (or mind) upon what one perceives, recognizes, or is aware of. The basic verb from the root *dh-k-r* means “to remember, commemorate, make mention of, bear in mind.” Thus, a causative verb from this root means “to remind” or “to admonish.” The reflexive verb from this root, *tadhakkar* or *idhdhakkar*, means “to receive reminding or admonition.” A reflexive verb expresses “the state into which the object of the action denoted by the [causative or intensive] form is brought by that action, as its effect or result” (Wright 1967: I, 36). In the divine interrogation of unbelievers who when facing the fires of hell request a second chance, this sense of the effect or result of reminding or admonition becomes clear: “Did We not give you long enough life so that he who would could receive admonition?” (Q 35:37). Such reception of reminding or admonition relates closely to the phrase *ūlū ʿl-bāb*, “those endowed with hearts” (i.e., understanding). Of the Qurʾān’s sixteen instances of this phrase, nine are connected with this root. A couple of good examples come from portions of Q 2:269, “None receive the reminder but those endowed with understanding,” and Q 13:19, “Those endowed with understanding receive admonition.” Because the word *dhikr* and *dhikrā* can indicate God’s message or scripture, the causative verb from this root can mean “to communicate the message,” giving the reflexive form the meaning “take the message to heart.” The cognitive dimension of the process of recollection shows up in Mahmoud Ayoub’s (1984) translation of the portion from Q 2:269, “none reflect save those who have intelligence.”

Another root, *f-k-r*, carries the basic idea of “thinking.” It occurs in the intensive (called in the case of *dhakkara*, above, the causative) verbal form, *fakkara*, meaning “to think” or “to meditate” and also in the intransitive reflexive form, *tafakkara*, “to consider” or “to meditate.” An early Meccan verse succinctly describes the cognition of a greedy and stubborn person “concocting” (Ibn Kathīr 1970) a response to God’s word: “He thought much and plotted” (Q 74:18). Here “thought much” translates the intensive form. It is paralleled by “plotted,” an intensive form of another verb meaning

“to ponder.” Whereas the intensive form suggests thinking something up, as in the case of the verse quoted, the reflexive form suggests intense thinking about something and requires the preposition *fī*, “about,” before the object of thought, as in Q 3:191, “thinking deeply about the creation of the heavens and the earth.” It is associated frequently with signs or evidence pointing to divine guidance, grace, or power: “God makes clear to you His signs in hopes you will think deeply” (Q 2:219). Thinking deeply is also a desired response to the proclaimed message: “We have sent down to you the message so you can explain clearly to people what is sent for them, so hopefully they will think deeply” (Q 16:44). Of the sixteen instances of this root, thirteen occur, like these two, in the reflexive form at the end of verses with no following prepositional phrase, merely implying what is to be thought deeply about. This formula reinforces the inner reflective dimension of the human cognitive process.

This intensity of inner cognition is also reflected in two verbal forms from the root *f-q-h*, featuring the basic idea of understanding. The basic verbal form *faqīha*, meaning “to be wise” or “to be understanding,” occurs nineteen times; and the intransitive reflexive form, *tafaqqaha*, “to be assiduous in instructing one’s-self” (Penrice 1873), occurs only once. The basic form occurs fifteen times in a negative context, such as: “when he reached a tract between two mountains, he found beneath them a people who scarcely understood” (Q 18:93); three times in conditional or hopeful contexts such as in the case of Moses who asks God to remove the impediment in his speech “so they may understand what I say” (Q 20:28); and once in a positive context: “We detail our speech for a people who understand” (Q 6:98). The single occurrence of the reflexive form occurs in a verse ordering a contingent from every war party to stay behind “to strive to understand religion” and then to admonish the others when they return (Q 9:122; Walker 2003: 103).

Some other roots such as *y-q-n*, *d-r-s*, and *f-h-m* can also be treated under the topic of the cognitive or active thinking dimension of human knowing. The latter root occurs only once in the causative form, *fahhama*, in a passage (Q 21:79) already mentioned in connection with divine teaching. The basic verb *darasa* from the root *d-r-s* means “to study or read attentively” and occurs five times. The related noun *dirāsa* occurs once (Q 6:156). Five of these six occurrences connect study with sacred scripture (e.g., Q 3:79).

The most significant verb describing the process of human cognition is *‘aqala* from the root *‘-q-l*. It points to the process of thinking or intellection: “to understand, be ingenious, prudent, or sagacious.” It occurs forty-nine times, almost always in the second or third person plural, usually in rhyme phrases of exhortation (Kermani 2002: 547) such as “Do you not understand?” or “In order that you may understand,” or “For a people who understand.” The colloquial English expression “to use your head” that has a near equivalent in the Qur’ān, “Do they not travel through the land and so have a heart to understand with?” (Q 22:46; cf. 7:179; 12:109), seems appropriate for interpreting this verb in forty of its occurrences. Another verse asks, “Or do you think most of them listen or use their heads (*ya‘qilūn*)? They are merely like cattle, but even more lost” (Q 25:44). The verb does not mean rational thinking in the Enlightenment sense, however, but rather thoughtful response to divine initiative. The verb occurs in positive, possibility, and negative contexts.

Positive

This verb depicts positive cognition, understanding, or “use of the head” nine times – less than one fifth of its total occurrences. Maybe al-Ghazālī’s (1967–8: I, 114–23) very positive assessment of this term stems from its rare exercise! One of these declares that only those given knowledge understand the parables God has given (Q 29:43). All eight of the other occurrences state that God gives signs in nature, culture, and history for those who “use their heads” (Q 2:164, 13:4; 16:12, 67; 29:35; 30:24, 28; 45:5).

Possibility

Nine occurrences of the verb from this root involve a possibility or hope expressed by the use of the common Qurʾānic modal particle *laʿalla*, meaning “perhaps” (Cragg 1973: 75). In most of these passages divine signs are expected, intended, or hoped to lead to understanding: “We have shown the signs plainly to you. Perhaps you will use your head” (Q 57:17; cf. 2:73, 242; 3:118; 24:61). In one of the verses in which divine signs are explicit, the conditional particle *in*, “if,” plays a semantic role similar to that of *laʿalla* in the other verses: “We have made plain to you the signs, if you use your head” (Q 3:118). God’s commands are also designed to lead to this understanding – in some sense, they are also signs: “Do not take life, which Allāh has forbidden, except for some just cause. This He commanded you. Perhaps you will use your head” (Q 6:151). Finally, the Qurʾān is offered “in hopes you will understand” (Q 12:2; 43:3). These possibility passages point to human responsibility in knowing (Kermani 2002: 548; Rahbar 1960: 63).

Negative

More than half (thirty-three) of all occurrences of verbs from this root are preceded by a negative particle. Seventeen of the thirty-three occur in the form of a question such as this one directed at the People of the Book: “Do you require right conduct of the people, and neglect [it] yourselves? And yet you study the scripture! Will you not use your head?” (Q 2:44). The blessings of the afterlife should lead to understanding: “The eternal home is good for those who are pious. Will you not then use your head?” (Q 6:32). Another verse asks whether the revealed Qurʾān should not lead to understanding: “We have sent down for you a book. A message for you is in it. Will you not then use your head?” (Q 21:10). Q 23:80 is one of only three of these negatively construed verses connecting signs of God with coming to understand: “He is the one who gives life and brings death. His is the alternation of night and day. Will you not then use your head?” This and the other two (Q 22:46; 29:63) do not mention the word “signs” even though they enumerate examples of them. Thus the word “signs,” *āyāt*, so common among the positive and perhaps verses, does not occur among the negatively construed verses – the clear majority of the verses featuring the basic verb from the root ʿ-q-l .

The remaining sixteen negative instances of this root occur in declarative sentences. For example, one verse criticizes the People of the Book who reject faith: “When you [believers] proclaim your call to prayer, they take it as mockery and sport because they are a people without understanding” (Q 5:58). Two verses charge a majority with failing to understand (Q 5:103; 49:4). Another criticizes a party of people for perverting the truth “knowingly after they understood it” (Q 2:75).

A couple of instances of this verb stand out as different from those mentioned so far. When Pharaoh claims that Moses is a madman, Moses says: “Lord of the east and the west, and all between! If you only used your head!” (Q 26:28). Here we have one of the two verses featuring this verb where the conditional particle *in* occurs. The other one was cited in connection with the verbs constructed with the possibility verses above. Finally, Q 67:10 is unique among all the verses containing this verb. In it unbelievers are depicted making confession at the judgment: “Had we but listened or used our heads, we would not be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire!”

Navid Kermani (2002: 548) draws attention to four verses in the *sūra* of the Greeks (Q 30:21–4), each ending with a different phrase representing positive human responses to divine signs. In the first verse, features of God’s design for human conjugal harmony are offered as “signs for a people who think deeply.” The second verse identifies divine creation and human language and culture as “signs for the knowledgeable.” The satisfaction of sleep and the desire for bounty represent the third set of “signs for a people who listen.” The final verse holds up the startling lightning and the life-giving rain as “signs for a people who understand.” Kermani notes that these responses to divine signs include the sensual, listening; the intellectual, thinking; and the understanding that embraces the other two. But the order of the culminating phrases and the presence of “the knowledgeable” in second place indicate that the Qur’ānic perspective will frequently defy any neat analysis. The first and the fourth phrases represent distinctive human ways of knowing as we have seen; the second and third represent ways of knowing that humans share with God. Listening is a perception humans share with God. Knowledge – and here the root is again *‘l-m* – consists of accurate interpretation that depends on human response to divine knowledge. I turn now to the human side of this knowing.

Knowing

The Qur’ān employs four roots for various aspects of knowing, *‘r-f*, *sh-‘r* (already discussed under perception as “awareness” and “recognition”), *d-r-y*, and *‘l-m*. The root *d-r-y* provides the basic verb *darā*, “to know,” occurring twelve times – all cast in the negative. This is the “when-where-and-how” kind of knowing. For example, in Q 4:11, believers are said not to know inheritance procedures. This root also provides a causative verb, *adrā*, “to make known,” occurring seventeen times. Sixteen times the Qur’ān asks, “What will make known to you?” In fifteen of them the phrase signals some mysterious (Sells 1999: 55) feature of the day of judgment (e.g., Q 82:18). When turning to words from the root *‘l-m* for human knowing, a rich array of passages can be

found. In words related to knowledge as *‘ilm*, the all-important connection between divine and human knowing is revealed.

Divine Knowledge and Human Knowing

A number of the most significant words for perception, cognition, and understanding that are unique to humanity have been explored. We are now ready to look at *‘ilm* as human knowledge. According to Rosenthal (1970: 31), the “reason for the existence of divine knowledge as well as its final destination are, in a manner of speaking, man and his need and desire for knowledge.”

I shall discuss this divine–human knowledge in the Qur’ān in relation to unbelievers, People of the Book, believers, prophets and messengers, and specially gifted persons. I will ignore it in relation to animals (Q 5:31), angels (Q 2:30, 102; 29:32), *jinn* (Q 37:158), and demons (Q 2:102).

Unbelievers and hypocrites

Unbelievers clearly know some things. Egyptian sorcerers are knowledgeable (*ālīm*) (Q 7:112; 10:79). Unbelievers know the creation of God in the beginning of things, even though their knowledge does not lead them to celebrate God’s praises (Q 56:62). God has created humans from what even unbelievers know (Q 70:39): dust, a sperm, a clot, and then from a piece of flesh (Q 22:5; 23:14; 40:67; 75:38). Moses reminds Pharaoh of what he knows: “You well know,” he says, “that these things have been sent down by none but the Lord of the heavens and the earth as eye-opening evidence” (Q 17:102). In Q 23:83–9, the Qur’ān directs Muḥammad to respond to the unbelievers’ objections with a series of questions: “Whose is the earth and all it contains?” “Who is the Lord of the seven heavens and the throne?” and “Who governs all things?” The verses containing the first and last questions conclude with the rhyme phrase, “If you know.” In each case, Muḥammad is assured, their answer will be “Allāh.” While they know the answer, they do not respond by accepting God’s final messenger. The Qur’ān pleads with the unbelievers as it does with Muḥammad’s receptors in general: “do not set up rivals for Allāh knowingly” (Q 2:20–2).

Even though unbelievers know some things of significance, they lack knowledge of such basic truths as “God sees” (Q 96:14), owns everything, and promises reliably (Q 10:55). Because they do not know better, they allow beings that “they do not know” (Q 16:56) to share God’s deity (Q 6:100). They tend to think some things they know are unknown to God (Q 41:22). They do not know that God enlarges or restricts their resources according to His pleasure (Q 39:52).

They also cannot comprehend the hereafter (Q 27:66). Some of them say there is no afterlife (Q 45:24). They reveal their lack of knowledge of the unseen world by giving female names to angels and by relying on angelic intercession (Q 53:26–30). Most unbelievers do not know that the resurrection precedes the judgment (Q 45:26). Nor does anyone know “what delights of the eye” are reserved for devout persons (Q 32:17).

Because unbelievers lack knowledge, they do not curb their passions (Q 6:119). They slay their children (Q 6:140), engage in shameful acts (Q 7:28), charge Muḥammad with forgery of scripture (Q 16:101), attribute calamity to evil omens (Q 7:131), and lead others astray (Q 6:144; 31:6). They reject God's signs even though they do "not have full knowledge of them" (Q 27:84).

Several times the Qur'ān appears to long for unbelievers to know, repeating, "If they only knew." If they only knew that the suffering of the next life is worse than that of this life (Q 68:33). "If only the unbelievers knew when they will not be able to ward off the fire from their faces, nor yet from their backs, and no help can reach them" (Q 21:39). Like the spider, unbelievers are constructing a flimsy house, "if they but knew" (Q 29:41).

But unbelievers have no real knowledge of what they claim to know about God (Q 10:68). Their lack of knowledge leads to disputation (Q 22:3; 63:7–8). In the final analysis, the way of the unbeliever could be called "the path of those who do not know" (Q 10:89). They could even be called "a people who do not know" (Q 9:6).

A frequent phrase about unbelievers is, "soon they will know." For example, "O my people! Do whatever you can. I will act; so you will soon know who will have the ultimate abode" (Q 6:135). Since all messages have a fixed term, those who reject the message will "soon know" (Q 6:67). Noah's detractors will "soon know" (Q 11:39); the people of Shu'ayb will "soon know" (Q 11:93). This reliance on future experience for knowledge provides evidence that *ilm* is knowledge of the truth about the way things truly are.

But unbelievers who resist the message of Muḥammad also suffer from all the limitations of human knowing. They persist in following their ancestors, but even they do not really know: "They say: 'Enough for us are the ways we found our fathers following.' What! even though their fathers were void of knowledge and guidance?" (Q 5:104). If they do not know, for example, that all the prophets and messengers sent to previous peoples were humans, they should consult the people who have scriptures (Q 16:43). Abraham asks his detractors to determine who is more worthy of authority: the deities they associate with God or God himself – if they "have the knowledge" (Q 6:81).

In another context where food taboos are being debunked, Muḥammad is told to say, "Inform me with knowledge if you speak the truth" (Q 6:143). In another verse knowledge is contrasted with surmise. Muḥammad is told to reply to those who blame God's decree for their polytheism: "Say: 'Have you any knowledge? Then display it for us. You follow nothing but opinion. You only conjecture'" (Q 6:148). Knowledge parallels revealed authority: "Yet they worship, besides Allāh, that for which no authority has been sent down to them, and that of which they have no knowledge" (Q 22:71).

People of the Book

That the People of the Book know the truth does not necessarily mean they will act on it in faith: "A party of them heard the word of Allāh, and, after they understood it, perverted it knowingly" (Q 2:75). The Israelites knew Moses was a messenger of God,

yet they still vexed and rejected him (Q 61:5). Another passage addressing the People of the Book lays bare what they know and what they do not know:

And when there came to them a messenger from Allāh, confirming what was with them, a party of the People of the Book threw away the book of Allāh behind their backs. As if they did not know!...They learned what harmed them, not what profited them. And they knew that those who bought it [magic] would have no share in the happiness of the hereafter. And vile was the price they sold their souls for, if they only knew! If they had kept their faith and guarded themselves from evil, the reward from their Lord would have been far better, if they but knew! (Q 2:101–3)

The three verses end with a rhyme phrase containing what they do not know or what they should have known, suggesting there is a knowledge these Israelites lacked, even though they had been taught knowledge. Nevertheless, the People of the Book can be termed “those with access to the message” and can be consulted by Muḥammad’s audience on matters of controversy such as whether the prophets who went before him were humans who received inspiration (Q 21:7).

The People of the Book neglected the religion of surrender through envy of one another after knowledge came to them (Q 3:19). They divided only after knowledge came to them (Q 42:14). They knew full well the Qur’ān came from God (Q 6:114). But, they concealed the truth that they knew to be true (Q 3:71). They disputed about things they knew and about things they knew not – about Abraham, for example, who lived before their religious communities were organized (Q 3:66). They knew that they told lies about God (Q 3:75, 78).

Believers

In short, to believe is to know, for example, about “the hour”: “Those who believe hold it in awe, and know that it is the truth” (Q 42:18). Even believers are not fully knowledgeable, however: “To those who leave their homes in the cause of Allāh, after suffering oppression, We will assuredly give a goodly home in this world; but truly the reward of the hereafter will be greater. If they only knew!” (Q 16:41). Believers in Medina are reprimanded for spreading false rumors: “You...said...things of which you had no knowledge” (Q 24:15). After instructing believers about divorce, a long verse ends with the rhyme phrase, “God knows and you do not know” (Q 2:232). Believers may not know all who will come against them in battle, but God does know (Q 8:60). Some things that are good for the believers may be counterintuitive – such as fighting; but God knows what believers do not (Q 2:216). Some rich believers may stay home from battle claiming exemption; but because God has sealed their hearts, they are without knowledge (Q 9:93).

Just as God has longings for unbelievers to know the truth, so He has some longings for the believers also to be fully knowledgeable. When instructing the faithful in fasting, the Qur’ān still laments, “If you only knew” (Q 2:184). Dropping commercial activities

to hasten off to Friday prayers is best for all, the Qurʾān reveals, “If you only knew” (Q 62:9). At any rate, the Qurʾān insists that God teaches believers what they do not know (Q 2:239).

In some verses the imperative mood of the verb “to know” is used. For example, “O you who believe!...know that Allāh comes in between a man and his heart, and that it is He to whom you will be gathered” (Q 8:24). The Qurʾān distinguishes between inappropriate behavior that is inadvertent on the part of believers and that done knowingly: “Do not consume your wealth...with intent to consume wrongfully and knowingly a part of the wealth of others” (Q 2:188; 3:135). At one stage, the Qurʾān exhorts believers not to come to prayer intoxicated, since “You should know what you are saying” (Q 4:43). A dialogue between leaders of his community and those who have come to believe in Muḥammad’s message suggests a parallel between knowledge and faith. The leaders ask the powerless believers in Muḥammad’s message: “Do you know that Muḥammad is a messenger from his Lord?” The believers then reply, “We believe in what he was sent with” (Q 7:75). In a Qurʾānic parable, a man from the farthest part of a city comes running to urge its citizens to accept the message of those sent to them from God. The citizens having apparently dispensed with him, this man is invited into God’s paradise. But, still thinking of his people, he wishes they had the knowledge he has had (Q 36:20–6).

Specialists

Two Qurʾānic verses mention some among the believers and the People of the Book who have gone deeply into the realm of knowledge. They are called, “those who are well-grounded in knowledge” (Q 3:7; 4:162). Only God and the well-grounded in knowledge among the Muslim believers understand the “figurative” (Cragg 1973: 42) or metaphorical verses of the Qurʾān according to Q 3:7:

Those who are twisted of mind look for figurative verses, seeking deviation and giving to them interpretations of their own; but no one *knows* their meaning except God; and those well-grounded in knowledge affirm: “We believe in them as all of them are from the Lord.” (A. Ali 2001)

The other verse speaks of the well-grounded in knowledge among the Children of Israel. They believe in what God revealed to Muḥammad and in the earlier revelations as well (Q 4:162). Maybe these are the knowledgeable of Israel whose acknowledgment of the Qurʾān should have provided evidence for the truth of Muḥammad’s message (Q 26:197). A person with “knowledge from the book” competes successfully against “a crafty jinni” (A. Ali 2001) by getting the throne of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon in an instant. This suggests some esoteric knowledge connected with God’s book. The commentators generally think the person knew a divine name that could cause distant objects to be brought near (Q 27:39–40). God taught another specialist knowledge, and he in turn taught Moses (Q 18:65–6).

The Qurʾān in ten places mentions “those given knowledge” or “those who have access to divine knowledge through God’s initiative in addressing humanity through the prophets” (Madigan 2001: 8): “Among them are men who listen to you, but in the end, when they leave you, they say to those given knowledge, ‘What is it he said just then?’” (Q 47:16); “God will raise those of you who believe, and those given knowledge, in position. God is aware of what you do” (Q 58:11).

Messengers

God’s messengers recognize their limits. When God gathers them on the judgment day to give an account of their mission, they will confess, “We have no knowledge, You are the Knower of the unseen” (Q 5:109). Jesus in such a scenario says, “You know what is in my heart, I do not know what is in Yours. For You know in full all that is hidden” (Q 5:116). What messengers do know comes from God. Noah says to his people, “My advice to you is sincere, I know from Allāh something you do not know” (Q 7:62). In a similar vein Abraham addresses his father, “O my father! knowledge has come to me that has not reached you. So follow me” (Q 19:43). God sends Muḥammad to bring people new knowledge (Q 2:151), but he does not have knowledge of the unseen: “As to the knowledge of the time, it is Allāh’s alone. I am only to warn plainly in public” (Q 67:25–6). He is not privy to the counsel of the angels (Q 38:69), and he does not have the ability to read the intentions of others (Q 9:101). Obviously, all human knowing has limits.

Limits of Human Knowing

Human knowing, as represented by words from the root *ʿ-l-m*, has limits. The Qurʾān makes clear that “God has created things of which you know nothing” (Q 16:8). As we have seen, one of the main things humans do not know – not even God’s messengers – is the time of the judgment (e.g., Q 33:63). In fact, only a little knowledge is given to ordinary humans (Q 17:85). Although they should not pursue what they have no knowledge of (Q 17:36), people tend to dispute in areas where they lack knowledge (Q 3:66). They indeed tend to exaggerate the effect of what they know. For example, when trouble comes, people cry to God, but when God shows them favor, they attribute the good things that happen to their own knowledge (Q 39:49; 40:83). Indeed some things defy any knowledge except God’s: “none can know the forces [angels] of your Lord except He” (Q 74:31). Yet the Qurʾān insists on the necessity of knowledge.

Necessity of Divine Knowledge

Knowledge appears to be a requisite for a number of things. Knowledge opens people to the Qurʾān as God’s truth: “That those given knowledge may know that it is the truth from your Lord, and so believe in it, and so their hearts will become humble before it”

(Q 22:54; 17:107). Signs can be self-evident for those given knowledge (Q 29:49), and people who know will receive explanations of God's signs (Q 6:97). God makes plain his ordinances to those with knowledge (Q 2:230). Knowledge prevents people from being misled (Q 30:29). Only those who have knowledge understand the parables (Q 29:43). People of knowledge and faith will be ready for the day of judgment (Q 30:56). Without knowledge, hearts may be sealed (Q 30:59). Knowledge, along with guidance and scripture, reduces disputes about God (Q 31:20). The gift of knowledge is a reward for goodness: "When he [Moses] reached full age, and was firmly established, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus We reward those who do good" (Q 28:14). We turn now to some overall conclusions from this study.

Conclusions

We observed that although the Qur'ān clearly presents some people as endowed with knowledge and understanding and frequently refers to those who know, more verses occur that speak of those who do not properly exercise their intellectual powers, who do not know, "but their hearts are divided because they are a people who do not use their heads" (*qawm lā ya'qilūn*) (Q 59:14). Furthermore, all of the sixty-five instances of *akthar*, "most," combined with various verbs such as "know," "believe," and "understand," turn up negative. For example, "Allāh never departs from His promise, but most of humanity does not know" (*lā ya'lamūn*) (Q 30:6). In other words, lack of knowledge (twenty-seven times), faith (fifteen times), and even gratitude (six times) seems to characterize the majority of humankind.

As essentially divine knowledge, *ilm* represents accurate appraisal of the way things really are. For example, according to the following verse, God knows the true state of affairs and the community can discern it:

O you who believe! When there comes to you believing women refugees, examine them. Allāh knows best about their faith. If you come to know that they are believers, then do not send them back to the unbelievers. (Q 60:10)

This special character of *ilm* finds confirmation in the fact that the major processes of coming to know, such as remembering, thinking, and understanding, find elaborate application to humans in the Qur'ān, but are never attributed to God. In other words, God knows, but does not need to exercise recollection, reflection, or thinking, nor does he need to come to understand. God perceives and knows all things as they actually are.

As human knowledge, *ilm* has this same character. Even unbelievers will "soon know" when they actually experience the final accounting (Q 6:135). Congruent with this, as human knowledge, *ilm* represents more a state of mind or heart and a divine endowment "equated with religious insight" (Rosenthal 1970: 29). Certain passages equate knowledge and faith through parallelism (e.g., Q 30:56). A verse cluster sets knowing, intellectual perception (*yafqahūn*), and believing in obvious parallel (Q 6:97–9; cf. Q 45:3–6). In fact, "those who believe know" (Q 2:26). Such knowledge is bound

up with reverence for God, “Those...who truly fear God have knowledge” (Q 35:28). Thus, a tradition attributed to the companion of the prophet Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652–3) must contain at least a grain of truth: “Knowledge is not acquired through much sharing of information. It is a light cast in the heart” (cited in al-Ghazālī 1967–8: I, 71).

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CHAPTER 23

Sex, Sexuality, and the Family

Khaleel Mohammed

The Qur'ān did not create an entirely new set of norms for the Arabian milieu to which it was initially addressed. Rather, Islam's main document concerned itself with improving the standards governing the prevailing practices, and thus reformed but never completely replaced all of Arabian patriarchal tribal values and customary laws. This is especially evident in the case of sex, sexuality, and family where such amelioration remained strictly within the parameters reflecting the values and realities of patriarchal society. As such, Islam's scripture may be seen as a cultural document in that it was addressed to a particular people to be perceived by them in light of their tribal traditions and worldview. While early exegetical literature therefore was very scanty, later material relied on philology and several other tools to expand upon the fullest possible meanings that could be derived from the text.

The Qur'ān claims to be a continuation of the Abrahamic message and contains much of what can be determined to be biblical in precedent and parallel, thus underlining a patriarchal value system. Females therefore remained, for all the amelioration of their status, subordinate to the males of their family. Prior to Islam, the tribal society of Arabia regarded the family as the basic social unit, and the tribe merely as an extended family. This can be seen in the Arabic term for tribe, *banū*, meaning literally "sons"; the idea was that all the members of a tribe could be traced to a common forefather. Humankind is referred to in the Qur'ān collectively as *banū Ādam*, the sons of Adam, and the Israelites are often referred to as *banū Isrā'īl*, the sons of Israel.

It has been pointed out that the number of Qur'ānic verses on legal issues is only about 500, in comparison to that document's total 6,236 verses (according to a common counting), and that many of the issues covered in positive law rely on the *ḥadīth* as

source material. On sex, sexuality, and family, however, the Qurʾān contains detailed accounts. Islam's source document clearly sees itself as inimitable (Q 2:23; 10:38; 4:82); by the fourth/tenth century, however, the jurists had conflated inimitability with immutability. It is this concept that underlines the idea of timelessness of the Qurʾān and which presents one of the greatest hurdles to change in traditional scriptural edicts according to many modernists today.

Medieval exegetes saw no problem in reconciling the concept of the timelessness of the Qurʾān with the fact that they studied and recorded the chronology and particulars of occasions of revelation of various verses. This study, rather than put the entire Qurʾān into historical context, was primarily to defend the concept of abrogation (*naskh*) wherein it was necessary to identify which were the earlier and later verses, in order to know which was abrogating and which was being abrogated. For many believers, modern discourses on the Qurʾān, however, tend to focus less on chronology, since this would give the impression that the Qurʾān is a temporal document; the following discussion eschews the issue and instead details the concepts of sex, sexuality, and family as found in the text, dealing only secondarily with exegetical and *ḥadīth* interpretations.

In the Qurʾān, the connection between sex and family can be seen in the fact that the term *nikāḥ* is interchangeably used to refer to sexual intercourse, and sometimes to the marital union (see, for example, Q 2:221, 230; 4:22, 25, 126; 60:10; in its various grammatical forms, the word is found twenty-three times in the Qurʾān). Premarital sex is prohibited (Q 4:25 etc.), and legal intercourse can only occur within heterosexual marriage, or between a man and his female slave (but not between a mistress and her male slave). The following discussion will deal with family issues first, and then focus on sex and sexuality.

For present purposes, the term “sexuality” is not limited to the understanding of carnal and sensual gratification and expression only. Rather, it deals with the religious significance associated with such sexuality, and the practices that such significance brings about, such as the sharply defined roles of masculine and feminine behavior within patriarchal society, where men are to provide, lead, and dominate, and women are to care for children, nurture, and assume a subservient role in the home.

Male dominance is reflected in the issue of nomenclature, where the Qurʾān clearly points to a patrilineal system. Q 33:5 states: “Call them by [the names] of their fathers.” In such a society, it was the male who was perceived to be in charge of providing for the family, and it was for this reason that the Qurʾān makes him the protector and manager of his wife's affairs: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because of that which God has favored one above the other, and because they support them from their means” (Q 4:34). It is for this reason that sons receive twice as much as daughters in inheritance, and the two-to-one ratio applies to male beneficiaries over their female counterparts in general (Q 4:11).

The role of the male as protector is also mirrored in the Qurʾānic imagery where the females are generally referred to in terms of their relationship to a male, rather than by name, for example the “wife of Lot” and the “wife of Noah.” Mary, mother of Jesus, is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qurʾān, and her uniqueness is underlined by her departure from the expected role of a female.

According to the Qur'ānic narrative (Q 3:35 ff.), while Mary was yet in her mother's womb, her mother consecrated her to the service of the Lord. This seems to be following the Hebrew Nazirite custom of temple service, and al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923; 1969: VI, 330–3) exegesis outlines it in detail. Having made this vow, the mother felt assured that her child would be a male, since the rigid purity requirements of the temple seemed to favor males. When Mary was born, her mother was therefore disappointed, since she felt her vow had been rejected. Q 3:36 puts the matter in perspective: "She said: 'I have given birth to a female.' But God knew better what she had brought forth." The Qur'ān goes on to state that Mary was purified and the best of women (Q 3:42). Many exegetes have written copiously on this verse, seeking to explain that her purity meant freedom from menses. (There are also detailed discussions on the temporality of her exalted status as the best of women: although the Qur'ān never suggests such status was temporary, exegetes have tried to show that Fāṭima or Khadīja replaced Mary as the chosen of God.) Some exegetes have gone as far as attributing the miraculous birth of Jesus to a hermaphroditic quality of Mary.

The woman's role as mother and housekeeper has made it difficult for the general body of exegetes to accept that women could be prophets, since such office would mean interaction with society at large, an image seemingly at odds with the Arab tribal concept. The Qur'ān does not even hint at female prophets, and many use Q 21:7 to insist on maleness as a prerequisite for prophethood, since the verse states: "We did not send before you but men to whom we revealed." Others, and they are the minority, have rebutted this to state that, since Mary was spoken to by the angels, and commissioned with specific rituals, she did receive the gift of prophethood. Others have relied on Q 16:43 and 21:7 to state that even though the Qur'ān does not specifically mention female prophets, the directive to ask the Jewish scholars about the history of prophets entails the accepting of Hebrew scriptural historiography, which includes female prophets.

With the coming of Islam, wives were no longer seen as chattels and viewed rather as partners in whom husbands could find tranquillity and completeness. This is reflected in the Qur'ānic verse:

And among His signs is this that He created for you mates from among yourselves that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts); verily in that are signs for those who reflect. (Q 30:21)

The Qur'ān specifies that a woman has rights as well as obligations, and that a husband should not seek to force her to live with him in order to maltreat her (Q 2:228, 231). Instead of the limitless polygyny of pre-Islamic Arabia, the number of wives a man may have is limited to four. Modernist interpreters focus on the fact that this was not incipient legislation, but was rather a form of gradualism, seeking to curb the practice of polygyny. They cite the Qur'ānic advice: "And if you fear that you cannot deal with them (the wives) justly, then (marry) one" (Q 4:3). By reading Q 4:3 and 4:129, they seek to show that the Qur'ān in fact exhorts to monogamy: "And if you cannot deal with them justly – and you will never be able to deal with them justly – then marry one." However,

the traditional exegesis has been, as follows clearly from the text (Q 4:129), to counsel that overt preferential treatment for one wife at the discomfort of the others should not be done, even though one may indeed love her above the others. While there are some Muslim countries that permit polygyny, government restrictions and societal conventions have contributed to the decline of the practice.

How does the family start? Since the traditional interpretation of the Qurʾān puts men as the protectors of women, a marriage is generally done under the authority of males, and the female is represented by a guardian. Qurʾānic language suggests that this practice is a continuation of a pre-Islamic custom, as is evident from the normative readings of Q 2:221; the translation of the verse wherein marriage is prohibited with polytheists is addressed to the men as “do not marry polytheist women,” *lā tankihū al-mushrikāt*. The women are not addressed directly, however, and the proscription may be translated as “do not give your females in marriage,” *lā tunkihū al-mushrikīn*. Jurists have interpreted marriage to be a contractual association, wherein there is an exchange of benefits or commodities. In exchange for the *ṣadāq/mahr*, the bride agrees to sexual fidelity to the husband and he agrees to maintain and provide for her. The Qurʾānic reading gives the impression that the *ṣadāq/mahr* is tangible property, but most Muslim jurists have relied on the *ḥadīth* to show that tangible property could be replaced by a service, such as the teaching of the Qurʾān to the bride (Muslim 1992: II, 700–53). The *ṣadāq/mahr* need not be given in full at the time of the marriage agreement, and can be paid in installments. Some contemporary Muslim scholars view the *ṣadāq/mahr* as something from a past era given that the purchase by one party of the other’s sexual fidelity seems to denote a lack of equality between spouses. These scholars allow for a ring exchange to replace the *ṣadāq/mahr*.

The Qurʾān does not insist on the permanency of the marriage bond, and, as such, contains detailed instructions on dissolution of marriage by divorce. In doing so, it prohibits or severely restricts certain pre-Islamic practices that were oppressive towards women. A man would say to his wife that she was like his mother to him (*ẓihār*): this pronouncement effectively denied her conjugal rights but did not set her free from the marriage (Q 33:4). In some cases, a man would utter an oath of sexual abstinence from his wife (*īlāʾ*), and continue such oath indefinitely. The Qurʾān restricted such separation to a maximum of four months; after such time, the husband had to choose between reconciliation and divorce (Q 2:226).

Males have authority in divorce, and the Qurʾān outlines the process by which such divorce is to be sought. Usually, after three pronouncements, followed by an *ʿidda*, a waiting period, a divorce is irrevocable (Q 2:229–30). This does not have to be done with the agreement of the wife and can therefore be a unilateral undertaking. Although the Qurʾān allows for divorce, *khulʿ*, initiated by a female (Q 2:229), the majority position is that such divorce must be done under the supervision of a judge and with the agreement of the husband.

Since the Qurʾānic directive is addressed to a primarily male audience and mirrors the realities of a seventh-century environment, some of its counsel on the solution of marital discord has been the subject of vehement contemporary debate. Q 4:34 advises that a good wife is she who is obedient to God and guards her chastity in her husband’s

absence. The verse goes on to instruct that if husbands fear *nushūz* (often explained as rebellion against the husband's authority) from their wives, they should first admonish them, and then ostracize them in bed, and then, finally, beat them (*wa-ḍribūhunna*). This last instruction has been seen as promoting violence against women.

Some scholars point out that while Q 4:129 seemingly advises what must be done regarding a husband who is guilty of *nushūz*, the verse contains pointers to gender preference. The actual verse reads thus:

And if a woman is afraid of *nushuz* from her husband, or abandonment by him, there is no sin upon them if they come to terms of agreement.

Why, they ask, is corporal punishment not mentioned as a means of recourse? Why is it necessary to point out that there is no sin upon the woman for coming to an agreement – is she not the victim here? They also contend that the term *b'alihā*, “her husband,” connotes a term of superiority, since its original meaning (*b'al*) is “lord.”

Opponents have launched several rebuttals. On the issue of the term used for “husband,” the contention is that, as noted earlier, the Qur'ān is addressing speakers of Arabic exclusively, using terms that were known to them. To read such terms in light of semantic detail is to seek to infuse meaning into the scripture rather than extrapolate guidance from it. Another argument is that the Qur'ān is not incipiently prescribing beating, but rather seeking to make it the last resort in a situation that was, and still is, all too common in spousal relationships. Through the process of gradualism, where one inculcates the meaning of the Qur'ān incrementally, it would be realized that beating is against the Islamic ethos and should not be resorted to. Others have relied on the medieval exegeses that, with *ḥadīth* support, propound that such beating should be done with a toothstick (*miswāk*) or similar object, held in a particular way so as not to cause discoloration or the breaking of the skin. Yet others, such as Amina Wadud (1999: 76), have argued, from an examination of Qur'ānic usage of certain terms, that the word normally taken to mean “beating” also means “to give an example.” Her argument is that the idea is to reason with the wife rather than resort to physical violence. Often omitted from such discussion, however, is the fact that the Qur'ān is the first of the Abrahamic scriptures to treat wife beating as an issue of seriousness. Previous scriptures did not acknowledge it, and this cannot mean that it was not present. It would seem that, whatever the original meaning of *wa-ḍribūhunna*, the textual directive is aimed at ameliorating a particular practice.

The preceding material on dealing with marital problems should not be taken as evidence that the Qur'ān makes the issue of divorce an easy one. Within the Qur'ānic framework, the maintenance of strong family ties is seen as part of righteousness, and, in many places of the text, the Muslims are exhorted to be kind and charitable towards parents and kinsfolk (Q 2:177; 4:136; 17:23). Indeed, once the marriage bond has been established, the Qur'ān exhorts towards good treatment and the maintaining of such a bond, unless in the case of clear sexual infidelity (Q 4:19). Even in the case where there may be a certain amount of dislike, the Qur'ān advises: “If you dislike them, it is possible that you dislike something and God may cause a lot of good to come through it” (Q 4:19).

Arbitration, with representatives from the kin of both parties, is to be sought out when there is an issue of great discord, but in which there is the possibility of saving the marriage (Q 4:35).

In the case of a divorced woman, she is allowed spousal support until her *idda* expires, and, in the case of a widow, she is supported for a year from the estate of her deceased husband, over and above that which she inherits (Q 2:240). Modernity has brought with it several attempts at reform. In many cases, such reform has been sought by a more direct textual analysis of the Qur'ānic verses, and a departure from the *ḥadīth*-influenced interpretations.

On the issue of sex and sexuality, as pointed out earlier, the Qur'ān strictly regulates the circumstances within which sexual relations can occur. It sees sex within such legal boundaries as fulfilling a human need, and not restricted only to the intent of procreation. In its narrative on the first couple's fall from grace, the Qur'ān differs from the Bible in that it does not impute blame to Eve; rather it states that Satan made them both go astray (Q 2:36). (Interestingly, the Qur'ān never mentions Eve by name, but Muslim exegetes have never had a problem with identifying Adam's mate as other than by the biblical appellation.) Any view of the woman as a temptress or tool of Satan, therefore, is not within the Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung*. The narrative, nonetheless, suggests that, even at this stage, God had ordained that the male be in charge of the female. Thus, God's order to take of the bounty of the garden is addressed primarily to Adam: "Dwell, you and your mate, in the garden" (Q 2:35). Some modern Muslim interpretations, in order to show the Qur'ān as a proto-feminist document, cite verses that seemingly impute blame to Adam rather than to Eve. Q 20:115 states: "We had already beforehand taken the covenant of Adam but he forgot: and We found on his part no firm resolve." Q 20:120 says: "But Satan whispered evil to him: he said 'O Adam! Shall I lead thee to the tree of eternity and to a kingdom that never decays?'" The verses, however, when placed into the context of other verses, seem rather to be based on the premise of establishing that the male of the primordial couple is being singled out on the presumption of his authority role. This is evidenced by Q 20:121, which says: "They both ate of the tree and so their nakedness appeared to them: they began to sew together leaves from the garden to cover themselves: thus did Adam disobey His Lord and allow himself to be led astray." They both ate, but it is Adam who is questioned. When God forgives, it is Adam who is chosen to receive the message of forgiveness and guidance. Says Q 2:37: "Then Adam received from his Lord words of inspiration and his Lord turned toward him; for He is Oft-returning Most-merciful." Q 20:122 states: "But his Lord chose him (for His grace): He turned to him and gave him guidance."

It is within this paradigm that the Qur'ānic image of sexuality is framed; certainly, for the women of seventh-century Arabian society, this new portrayal was a vast improvement over their contemporaries from other Abrahamic religions. Based on the Adam and Eve story, conservative Muslims view that sexual relations, when allowed, can only be heterosexual in nature. While the Qur'ān fully acknowledges the sexual nature of human beings, it carefully outlines those with whom sexual relations are prohibited. Notably, the males are the ones addressed:

And marry not women whom your fathers married except what is past: it was shameful and odious, an abominable custom indeed. Prohibited to you (for marriage) are: your mother, daughters, sisters, father's sisters, mother's sisters; brother's daughters, sister's daughters, foster-mothers (who suckled you), foster-sisters; your wives' mothers; your step-daughters under your guardianship born of your wives to whom ye have gone in no prohibition if ye have not gone in; (those who have been) wives of your sons proceeding from your loins; and two sisters in wedlock at one and the same time except for what is past; for God is Oft-forgiving Most-merciful. Also (prohibited are) women already married except those whom your right hands possess. Thus hath God ordained (prohibitions) against you: except for these all others are lawful provided ye seek (them in marriage) with gifts from your property desiring chastity not lust. (Q 4:22–4)

The seven references in the Qur'ān to the story of Lot and his people seem to indicate that divine anger and punishment were because of their deviant sexual practices (Q 7:80–4; 11:77–83; 21:74; 22:43; 26:165–75; 27:56–9; 29:27–33). The nature of such practice is explicitly stated thus:

Of all the creatures in the world will you approach males, leaving those whom God has created for you to be your mates? Indeed, you are a people going beyond limits. They said: "O Lot! If you do not desist, you will surely be cast out." He said: "I detest what you do. O my Lord! deliver me and my family from such things as they do!" So We delivered him and all of his family, except for an old woman who lingered behind. But the rest We destroyed utterly. We rained down on them a shower (of brimstone): and the shower was indeed sore upon those who had been warned. (Q 26:165–75)

In the foregoing verses, the deviation is attributed to sodomy and there is no clear reference to female–female sexual relations. Most exegetes have sought to explain away the one verse in the Qur'ān that seems to indicate a prohibition of such relations. Such exegetes suggest that certain verses were revealed at an early period when there was a difference in punishment based on gender.

If any of your women are guilty of lewdness take the evidence of four (reliable) witnesses from amongst you against them; and if they testify confine them to houses until death do claim them or God ordain for them some (other) way. If two men among you are guilty of lewdness punish them both. If they repent and amend leave them alone, for God is Oft-returning, Most-merciful. (Q 4:14–15)

The second of the two verses, however, makes it clear that, in the case of the men, it is sodomy rather than heterosexual intercourse that is the offense, and suggests that the preceding verse is dealing with female–female sex. As Jim Wafer (in Roscoe and Murray 1997: 89) has observed, the mildness of the passage contrasts with other verses where severe punishments are prescribed for other crimes. In Q 24:2, where the Qur'ān mentions its most severe punishment for sexual transgression, *zīna*, the penalty is only 100 lashes, and is halved in the case of slaves. The stiffer penalties of stoning to death for married persons, or death for homosexuals, find their source in the *ḥadīth*. It would seem that in general, then, the Qur'ān is far more lenient in its treatment of sexual

misconduct, heterosexual or homosexual. Even the establishment of such conduct had to be through four eyewitnesses, each testifying to actual penetration, a situation that was extremely difficult unless in a situation of absolute wantonness. Concomitant with such a stringent standard of establishing guilt, the witnesses were liable to punishment for slander if they could not establish the guilt of the accused parties (Q 24:4). Notably, although jurists have applied the law in regards to men as well, the accusation is only phrased in respect of the falsely accused being women. The consensus among exegetes is that the particular verse was revealed regarding an accusation against Muḥammad's wife, ʿĀ'isha. The verse states: "And those who accuse chaste women, and do not produce four witnesses, flog them eighty lashes, and forever reject their testimony. They are indeed mischief-mongers" (Q 24:4).

The establishment of several groups among Muslims, such as Queer Jihad, The Inner Circle (Cape Town, South Africa), and the Unity Mosque (Toronto, Canada), that see lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender relations as a matter of genetics rather than of choice, contend that the verses pertaining to Lot's people are misunderstood. Their argument is that any blameworthy action is to be considered in terms of intentionality and choice. Genetic programming – as it does for those who are right- or left-handed – dictates sexuality, and there is therefore no choice or intentionality involved. In Q7:81, Lot remonstrates with his people thus: "You approach men instead of women out of your lust (*shahwatan*)..." This qualification indicates that choice was involved, which is why Lot had also offered his daughters to the mob. This interpretation is gaining currency among many Muslims who, in the light of modern science, are realizing the strength of the argument for genetic programming as that which determines sexual orientation. In 2015 the mufti of Zambia, Shaykh Assadullah Mwale, openly stated that sexual orientation is not a matter of choice and that Muslim leaders ought to support LGBT Muslims.

This argument, in light of the United States Supreme Court 2015 ruling in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case, wherein same-sex marriages are now legal, has spurred some Muslim scholars and organizations to deem that, since the Qur'ānic laws about marriage and sexuality are addressed to a heteronormative society, they are not permanent. Organizations such as The Inner Circle and Toronto Unity Mosque therefore deem same-sex marriages as allowable within Islam. Interestingly, a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 42 percent of American Muslims now accept same-sex marriages.

Sexual relations are prohibited during menstruation, for a period after childbirth, during the daylight hours of Ramaḍān, and while on pilgrimage. A divorced woman must remain chaste for three months after the final pronouncement, and a widow must wait four months and ten days after the demise of her spouse (Q 2:234). Exegetes have spilled much ink discussing Q 2:223, which states: "Your wives are as a field unto you, so approach your field however, wherever, and whenever you wish." The term translated as "however, wherever, and whenever" is *annā* and has given rise to debates as to whether the Qur'ān allows (heterosexual) anal intercourse. Some exegetes have opined that since the woman is referred to as a "field" and that this imagery suggests the casting of seed to produce vegetation, then the reference is to vaginal intercourse only.

Others have stated that such an interpretation is incorrect; whether the intercourse is vaginal or otherwise, the woman is nonetheless like a field since it is her body in which the husband's seed germinates, and that a farmer can choose whether he leaves his field fallow or not.

This verse seems to reflect a discourse among Jews that is contained in the Talmud, and the vast majority of Muslim exegesis evidences that the early commentators were convinced of this. The traditions that they adduce in support of the explanations seem to match the following Talmudic reports:

R. Johanan b. Dahabai said: the Ministering Angels told me four things: (1) People are born lame because they overturned the table; (2) dumb because they look at that place (3) deaf because they converse during congress (4) blind because they look at that place. This however contradicts Imma Shalom's report who was asked, Why are their children so beautiful? She replied: Because my husband neither converses with me neither at the beginning, nor at the end of night, but only at midnight, and when he converses, he uncovers only a handbreadth, and covers a handbreadth, and is as though he were compelled by a demon....Rabbi Johanan said: The above is the view of Johanan b. Dahabai, but our sages said: The Halakah is not as R. Johanan b. Dahabai says, but a man may do wherever he pleases with his wife. (Talmud: Nedarim 20a)

The Rabbis said: if a man has intercourse standing, he is liable to have convulsions, if sitting, spasms. If she is above and he below, he will be subject to diarrhoea. (Talmud: Gittin 70a)

Here, it is important to note too that the Qur'ānic imagery of the woman as "field" is similar to the Halakhic presentation. Twice in Mishnah: Ketubah, the expression "your field has been flooded" is used to refer to women in a sexual context: (1) when a bride has no physical signs of virginity, she says to her husband, "After you betrothed me, I have been raped, and your field has been ruined by a flood" (Mishnah: Ketubah 1:6). In the next instance, if she has a physical blemish after betrothal, she is described as a field that has been ruined by a flood (Mishnah: Ketubah 7:8). The Talmud adopts this image and in Nedarim 90b–91a portrays the husband of the woman who has been raped as one whose field has been flooded. If she is unable to go through with a wedding because of her menses or some sickness, the man is again referred to as one whose field has been flooded (Talmud: Ketubah 2a–b). Of course, one may run the danger of what may be termed parallelomania here, but given the conditions and the interaction between the Jews and Muslims of Medina, as well as the Qur'ānic vocabulary, the preponderance of the evidence seems to indicate that Q 2:223 is indeed referring to a specific Judaic attitude.

The Qur'ānic view of the characteristics of the ideal man and woman has also influenced the conduct of gender interaction. If the man is strong, stubborn, and jealous, the honor of the family rests in the conduct of the nurturing, weaker woman who must always be mindful of the stronger male sex instinct. As such it is the woman who has to cover her breasts and wear a specific type of outer garment; it is she who has to speak in a manner that does not entice the male, and it is she who must walk in such a way as not to draw attention to herself (Q 24:31; 33:32, 59).

There is much contemporary disagreement regarding the aspect of women's dress, especially with regard to the head covering, *khimār*, more often and incorrectly referred to as *hijāb*. Q 24:31, it is argued, mandates the covering of the breasts, and not the head, since the term used in the verse, *juyūb*, refers to the cleft in the breasts. Those to, and among, whom a woman may adopt some laxity in respect of the sartorial requirements demanded of her are her husband, father, father-in-law, sons, stepsons, brothers, nephews, other Muslim women, old male servants who no longer have a sex drive, or small children who are as yet not curious about the private parts of the female (Q 24:31).

The verse, "a fornicator does not marry except a fornicatress" (Q 24:3), may suggest premarital chastity on the part of both sexes. Since a man, according to the Qur'ānic imagery, could legitimately have sexual intercourse with his slave woman, the issue of virginity seems more stressed upon for the females.

The Qur'ān permits marriage with the People of the Book, and this has been taken to mean the Jews and Christians, although many jurists extended the term to include Zoroastrians. Such marriage, however, is restricted to a Muslim man contracting marriage with a woman of the People of the Book, based on the clear text of the verse: "Lawful to you are the chaste women from the believers and chaste women from those who were given the book before you" (Q 5:5). As outlined earlier, marriage with polytheists is prohibited according to Q 2:221. The only case in which marriage with a polytheist man or woman can be contracted is when the Muslim has been found guilty of adultery or fornication (Q 24:3).

Twelver Shī'ites have allowed the continuation of the pre-Islamic practice of temporary marriage, *mut'ā*, based on Q 4:24: "Give those with whom you have enjoyed sexual relations their *ṣadāq* (dowry)." They argue that Muḥammad never issued a prohibition against it, and that the *ḥadīths* reporting any proscription are from unreliable Sunnī sources. They argue that it was ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb who banned it, and that such prohibition carries no legal weight since no one can ban that which is allowed in the Qur'ān. While it may have been on the decline prior to the Iranian revolution, the contemporary exhortation of many Shī'ī scholars for its practice, as well as continued conflicts and economic hardships in the Middle East, have made the institution a pragmatic solution to the needs of the people and an absolutely superior one to the "free" relations between sexes in Western countries.

The Qur'ān does not hint in any way at birth control and abortion, and this has led to various differences of opinion among jurists. Since the document absolutely prohibits the killing of children due to economic circumstances (Q 6:151; 17:31), some jurists have argued against birth control and abortion. The majority opinion seems to be based on *ḥadīth* that seem to allow conditional permissibility. *Ḥadīth* that allow *coitus interruptus* (Arabic *ʿazl*) are used as the basis for rulings in favor of birth control, since Muḥammad would purportedly not have allowed the practice if he knew it was wrong. Interpretations of the Qur'ān that purport to show that in the first three months a fetus is without a soul have been used to allow abortion during that period, although there is no direct indication of such an idea in the text. Like many concepts of Islamic practice, the idea has been traced to the *ḥadīth*. This has given rise to the realization that much of

what passes as the Islamic understanding on family, sex, and sexuality is, in fact, the accumulated medieval regional and cultural imprint on the interpretation of religion. Unlike Judaism, which has had its Haskalah, and Christianity, which has had its Renaissance, the interpretation of Islam, for the most part, remains the domain of faith-based scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) who still use medieval source texts. This recognition, along with the concomitant re-examination of *ḥadīth* and legal literature, is now becoming the focus of many Muslim scholars who are seeking to achieve gender parity, or as some claim, restore the rights of women and family as outlined in the pristine message of the Qurʾān. Among such scholars are Amina Wadud (1999), Leila Ahmed (1982), Azizah al-Hibri (1982), Riffat Hassan (1991), Asma Barlas (2002), Abdullahi an-Naʿim (1990), and Mohammed Arkoun (1994).

Further reading

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CHAPTER 24

Jihād

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This chapter treats the topic of war in the Qurʾān, which is not synonymous with *jihād*. The range and nuances associated with the meaning of *jihād* will be explored, but it is important to note first that *jihād* does *not* mean holy war, nor does it have any linguistic association whatsoever with the notion of warring. Two other words unambiguously assume the meaning of warring and war in the Qurʾān: *qitāl* and *ḥarb*. We shall observe how the former is the more common Qurʾānic term for warring and even for divinely authorized war, while the latter is the term for engaging in profane war.

Jihād has nevertheless come to be associated in parts of both the Islamic world and the West with the Islamic version of “holy war,” and in some Qurʾānic settings it appears in the context of fighting. The term “holy war” can be confusing when applied to non-Christian religions, however, since it evolved out of a Christian context as a war fought on behalf of the ideal of Christian faith and its propagation. Some Muslims have waged (and some continue to wage) wars that they believe are on behalf of the Islamic faith and its propagation, so Islam does include within its religious repertoire this particular notion of “holy war.” In general, however, divinely sanctioned warring in Islam occurs for other purposes.

Like virtually all religions from East to West, Islam as a religious civilization allows for war under certain conditions, and, like other religions, the ultimate authority for engaging in war is the divinity. Wars may be divinely authorized beforehand or justified afterwards – or they may not. Not all wars are ordained by God, according to Islam, and there have always been battles and wars waged by factions in the Muslim world that were considered by leading religious scholars not to have been divinely justified. Elaborate discussions may be found in Islamic religious literatures over what constitutes

divinely authorized war, the authority for engaging the enemy, definitions of enemy, the goal of military engagement, and so forth (Morabia 1974; Peters 1996). The traditions of the prophet (*ḥadīth*) also serve as a source for representing divine rationale in these discussions. Each of the six authoritative Sunnī collections and four authoritative Shīʿite collections contains sections (“books”) devoted to the prophet’s speech and acts associated with warring, usually named “The book of *jihād*,” or “The book of *jihād* and expeditions (*siyar*).” However, it is usually the Qurʾān, the record of God’s direct revelation to the prophet Muḥammad, that is cited as the ultimate authority for the determination and validation of divinely ordained war.

Arabic dictionaries define the basic meaning for the root of *jihād*, *j-h-d*, as exerting oneself and taking extraordinary pains, employing oneself vigorously and diligently. The specific form of the root from which *jihād* is derived is a verbal form that expresses mutuality of action or relates the action to another entity. *Jihād*, therefore, is exerting one’s utmost efforts and abilities in relation to an “other,” and that other is usually defined as “an object of disapprobation” that could range from a concrete human enemy to Satan or to the evil inclinations in one’s own self (Lane 1863; Ibn Manẓūr 1375/1956). *Jihād* can thus take on a range of meanings and be applied to a number of different kinds of action. It easily becomes a religiously laden term because it represents the most basic ethical message of religion, that one must strive to do the good by overcoming the bad.

Qitāl, on the other hand, serves as a technical term in the Qurʾān for warring. The root meaning of this term is “kill,” and *qitāl* occurs in the same verbal form as *jihād*, which expresses mutuality of action or relates the action to another entity. But *qitāl* is not a religious term like *jihād*. It means, simply, warring; that is, armed engagement along with a body of other comrades in hostile conflict directed against an outside group. Although *qitāl* can be activated for religious causes, it may also be employed for mundane reasons. It is not surprising, then, that the operative term in Islam for divinely authorized warring is the religiously laden *jihād*.

Contextual Meanings of *Jihād*, *Qitāl*, and *Ḥarb*

The full range of Qurʾānic views on warring will be observed below by examining all three words that express this act in the Qurʾān. Because of the particular significance of *jihād* in contemporary discourse among both Muslims and non-Muslims, we begin with a close contextual reading of this rich term.

Although the Qurʾān is a written book, it was and continues to be known to most Muslims as an oral text. It was constructed in order to be recited and assimilated in an oral literary environment and, like all revelation, reduced to writing at a later point in its literary history. The addressee is therefore both hearer and reader. These two processes of absorption and construction of meaning are different, of course, with the latter being far more analytical than the former. But in both modes, individual words, word combinations, and word associations convey meaning in a variety of ways. It is clear that meaning is constructed largely from words and phrases in their specific

contexts, but words and phrases, and especially repeated idioms, are also unconsciously and instinctively associated by the addressee with their appearance or the appearance of similar forms in other contexts. The meanings in these other contexts, therefore, have an influence on the meaning in the context in question. In order to truly understand the meaning of the word *jihād*, then, one must examine the range of its various forms and contextual associations.

Its most simple form, *jahd*, occurs four times in the Qurʾān in the idiom *aqşamū bi-ʾllah jahd aymānihim*, which should be translated as “They swear (swore) by God their most powerful (strongest) oaths” (Q 6:109; 16:38; 24:53; 35:42). The reference is always to hypocritical unbelievers who claim in one way or another that, while they would follow the prophet if authentic proof came to them, they yet remain unconvinced. Contextually, *jahd* in this repeated phrase conveys the sense that these unbelievers make oaths in the name of God with what might appear to be tremendous sincerity, yet from the standpoint of the Qurʾān, they are clearly insincere because in the final analysis, they do not accept the truth of the Qurʾānic signs. The related form, *juhd*, occurs once (Q 9:79), also in a polemical context directed against deniers (*kuffār*) and hypocritical dissenters (*munāfiqūn*). But the term refers to certain obedient believers with modest means who have nothing more to contribute to the community chest than their own *juhd* – that is, their own personal effort and ability.

Arabic grammatical tenses in the Qurʾān do not necessarily convey a sense of time in the same way as European languages. In the case of *jāhada*, the verb form from which *jihād* is constructed, the form typically referred to as past, or “perfect,” often conveys a sense of the English present participle: “one who strives vigorously and diligently,” as in Q 9:19: “Do you consider the water-givers of the *ḥajj* and the *ʾimāra* to the sacred mosque equal to one who believes in God and the last day and strives (*jāhada*) in the path of God?” I will be referring to verb tense forms typically used in English grammars of Arabic, but I use these designations to differentiate forms rather than tenses in the Qurʾān. I use the designation “past” in what follows only to refer to the form (morphology) and not as a reference to the usual sense of time.

The past form of *jāhada* in the Qurʾān almost never refers directly to fighting or even to any kind of conflict with non-believers (except in Q 9:88, see below). It typically occurs in one of three contexts: in reference to the afterlife (Q 2:217–18; 3:142; 16:108–10; 29:6–7, 68–9), as one reference among a number of references to sincerity in belief or sincerity in belonging to the community of believers (in all the just-cited references plus Q 8:72, 75; 9:16, 19, 20; 49:14–15), or as a reference to kinship pressure to remain outside the community of believers (Q 29:8; 31:14–15). In the first contextual category, those who strive are contrasted with those who will be destined for an afterlife in hell. The distinction becomes idiomatic: those who strive stand out against those “destined for the fire” or “the losers.” In the second category, striving occurs among a number of other descriptors representing the religious integrity of the believer. In the last contextual category listed above (family pressure to associate with polytheism), God commands respect and care for one’s parents (cf. Exodus 20:11; Deuteronomy 5:15) unless they “strive/strove (to influence) you to associate with Me anything of which you have no knowledge.”

Jāhada, in the form of the past, is often included along with other verbal determinations of belonging: “those who believe, emigrate and strive in the path of God” (e.g., Q 2:218; 8:72, 74; 9:20; similar in Q 16:110). When referring to those who strive along with those who emigrate, the reference is to a specific group of believers defined by their emigration (*hijra*, thus *muhājirūn*) along with Muḥammad from Mecca to Medina. The verbs in this repeated verb-string occur in the form of the past tense, but their importance lies in their indicating the sincerity of the believer. The believer is thus a person who believes in God and His prophet, who supported the prophet strongly enough to leave home in Mecca for an uncertain future in Medina, and who exerts great effort in following the divinely determined path along with all that that commitment entails.

Jāhada, whether in the “past” or other forms, often occurs as part of an idiomatic phrase in which it is followed by “in the path of God” (*fī sabīl Allāh*, sometimes translated as “in the way of God” or “for religion,” inevitably in reference to Islam, and conveying the sense of religious commitment). In this combination, it means to engage vigorously in religiously defined acts. “In the path of God” follows other verbs as well, the most important for this discussion being *qitāl*.¹ *Jihād* in the path of God and *qitāl* in the path of God are not synonymous. *Qitāl* in the path of God is religiously authorized war. *Jihād* in the path of God may include religiously authorized war, but it conveys a broader range of authorized or required religious acts. It might best be defined as religious activism.

In none of the three categories noted above is the past tense form of *jāhada* associated with aggression against unbelievers or enemies. The one exception is Q 9:88, which occurs in a long section (Q 9:73–89) complaining bitterly against deniers (*kuffār*) and dissenters (*munāfiqūn*), in which *jihād* occurs in all of its verbal forms found in the Qurʾān. This general tendency is not the case when the verb occurs in the imperfect and imperative forms. In these forms, *jāhada* occurs occasionally as an expression of general religious piety as striving “in the path of God” (see Q 5:35, 54), but it is more prevalent in the expression, “strive with your possessions and your souls” (*bi-amwālikum wa-anfusikum*, translated alternatively as “with your possessions and your own selves”). The latter idiom typically occurs in aggressive or militant contexts, as in Q 9:41: “Set out [for battle] lightly or heavily [armed] and strive with your possessions and your souls in the path of God” (see Q 9:41–4, 73–89 in which it occurs three times), but, in all the cases where this expression is found, it is in a context of complaint against those who prefer to remain behind while others set out on battle campaigns as in Q 9:81: “Those left behind are happy, sitting at home in opposition to the messenger of God, hating to strive with their possessions and their souls.” Sometimes in the imperative, *jāhid* occurs by itself as an expression of aggression (Q 9:73, 86; 66:9). In the imperfect, it occurs once in an aggressive context with a combination of the two expressions, “in the path of God” and “with your possessions” (Q 9:81), and once again in combination but in a non-aggressive context (Q 61:11). Occasionally it occurs in the imperfect independently and in a non-aggressive context (Q 22:78; 29:6).

The noun form, *jihād*, occurs only four times in the Qurʾān. It occurs once in an aggressive context in combination with the imperative (Q 25:52): “Strive a great striving against them with it” (*jāhidhum bihi jihādan kabīran*), once again in a similar combination but not

in an aggressive context (Q 22:78): “Strive in God a sincere striving,” and twice in aggressive contexts with other word combinations (Q 9:24; 60:1), the latter clearly indicating military engagement with enemies. The participial form, *mujāhid(ū/īn)*, occurs in two contexts, both militant (Q 4:95–6; 47:31). The former context opens in the previous verse (4:94) with an expression of raiding, “when you set out (*idhā ḍarabtum*) in the path of God,” where the participial form appears three times and includes both expressions of “in the path of God” and “with possessions and souls.” The latter is less obviously one of battle, though it reflects militant conflict with those who oppose Muḥammad.

Taken together, the forms of the root *j-h-d* in their various Qurʾānic contexts convey meanings that range from great personal effort to generic religious piety, to engaging in or supplying the war effort on behalf of the new community of believers. *Jihād*, then, is a nuanced term, and its meanings broadened further in Qurʾān interpretation and other post-Qurʾānic religious literatures. Because of its basic notion of deep and total personal effort, *jihād*, especially “in the path of God,” became the operative term for warring on behalf of Islam and the Muslim community. *Qitāl* (*qātala*) is far more prevalent in the Qurʾān as a reference to fighting, occurring some sixty-seven times. But given the range of religious meanings and contexts associated with *jihād* in the Qurʾān, it should not be surprising that engagement in war on behalf of the Muslim community, an act that often resulted in the ultimate effort of personal sacrifice in death on the battlefield, came to be identified with *jihād* rather than *qitāl*.

Another root term for warring, *ḥ-r-b*, can also be found in the Qurʾān, but it occurs far less frequently than either *qitāl* or *jihād*. Like these latter words, the word is found in the verbal form conveying mutuality of action or relating action to another entity (*ḥāraba*). In the case of *ḥāraba*, however, which occurs only twice in the Qurʾān (Q 5:33; 9:107), warring is the exact opposite of *jāhada* because it is directed against God and his prophet (*yuhāribūna/ḥāraba llāha warasūlahu*). Warring as *ḥāraba*, therefore, cannot be authorized by God. It can never be “holy war.” However, in its nounal form, *ḥarb* is distinct from the nouns *jihād* and *qitāl* in that it does not occur in the form expressing mutuality or transfer of action. Rather than meaning “fighting” or “battling,” as do the gerunds *jihād* and *qitāl*, *ḥarb* means, simply, war, whether holy or profane, as in Q 8:57: “If you come upon them in war (*faʾimma tathqafannahum fī ḥarb*), then scatter those behind them by means of them; perhaps they will take warning!” (cf. Q 2:279).

Qurʾānic Militancy in Historical Context

As in the case of the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and other examples of divine scripture, the Qurʾān was revealed in a polemical context. One of the fundamental phenomenological aspects of divine scripture is its rarity, to which the salvation histories of the three great families of Abrahamic scriptural monotheisms attest. God may grant revelations to his creatures through a variety of means, but an official and eternal written record of revelation in the form of scripture is extraordinary. To put it differently, there must be an exceptional reason for God to break the natural course of nature by providing a particular portion of humanity with a (written) record of the divine will.

An irruption of such magnitude into the workings of human history would occur only because of exceptional circumstances, and in every case of scriptural revelation it is assumed that God connects directly with humanity in order to induce a major sea change in behavior or belief. No document is quite as revolutionary as scripture. It demands change in the name of the most powerful being in existence, more authoritative than the greatest human ruler and mightier than the most enormous army. But in every case of such revelation, the salvation history around and through which the revelation occurs emphasizes how difficult it was for the general populace to recognize the divine word. In every case of scriptural revelation, only a small elite accepts God's word unconditionally, and it becomes the task of that elite to bring the word to humanity at large.² Because of the natural human tendency to resist its demand for unconditional and radical change, scripture is polemical by its very nature. It chastises, cajoles, and threatens. When it meets human stubbornness under certain historical conditions, it commands war.

Those historical conditions are found quite clearly in the case of two emergent scriptures – the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān – but lacking in two others: the New Testament and the Talmud. The latter pair emerged in a historical environment that was dominated overwhelmingly by the political and military might of the Roman Empire. The two communities that spoke on behalf of these revealed scriptures emerged under the heel of Rome and found that they had no hope of dominating militarily the competing contemporary religious or ethnic polities. Their scriptures were most certainly highly polemical, but they tended not to advocate divinely authorized war. It was just too costly in human and political terms, though they succeeded in constructing holy war ideas for their communities later, when the historical circumstances allowed such a development.

Conversely, the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān emerged in environments in which tribal communities with similar military capabilities regularly battled one another on a largely even playing field, the former during the first millennium BCE in the ancient Near East, and the latter in sixth-century CE Arabia. Fighting was a regular and normal part of tribal life in both contexts, so when a new community emerged with an independent identity, it was natural for it to engage in militant conflict with other groups. When that community defined itself against other communities in religious terms that included belief in one great God and in a divinely revealed scripture, permission and even encouragement for warring was authorized by that God and through that scripture (see Firestone 2005).

This brief schema is presented here in order to set the militant verses of the Qur'ān in context. Each of the four scriptures mentioned here contains polemical material, some of it quite virulent. In each scripture, some invective is directed against hostile outside forces while other polemics are reserved for competing factions within the larger communities of believers. It appears to be a natural phenomenon of scriptural religion to represent and articulate through scripture the anger and resentment that the newly emerging communities experienced as they battled their way to acceptance. Within the historical context of late antiquity, survival for emergent Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism required that their militancy be expressed in ways that would not actually

encourage the bearing of arms. The Qur'ān, on the other hand, like the Hebrew Bible before it, seems to have emerged in a historical context that not merely allowed, but required, a certain militancy for it to survive.

When reading the Qur'ān, one finds different forms of expression of conflict and polemic. The ubiquitous references and partial narratives about ancient prophets inevitably present stories in which God's messengers are confronted by unbelieving and unrelenting polytheists, who combine unethical behaviors with their denial of monotheism. Sometimes the people engage in violence among themselves; often they threaten the prophet who was sent to them with death. The inevitable result is divinely ordained punishment and destruction of the unbelievers, but survival of the prophet and any remnant believers that may have listened to his message. These are stories that depict ancient times, but they serve as allegories for the Qur'ānic present. Muḥammad is the prophet who is denied and threatened by his own people. His campaigns against his (and God's) enemies are divinely sanctioned, for without a change of heart, the Arab people are destined to meet the same unhappy fate as the annihilated peoples who came before. Unless they accept the divine will as articulated by the prophet, they will suffer imminent and painful destruction through fire and brimstone, earthquake, and other divinely initiated disasters.

The stories of ancient prophets serve as a subtext for the Qur'ānic present, and that present is portrayed as a time for radical change from polytheism to monotheism and from wickedness and depravity to morality and justice. The world is described in binary terms, with the new prophet offering a stubborn people their one and only opportunity to emerge out of the darkness into light. This scenario is actually typical of emerging religion, where the newly emerging faith community meets vigorous opposition from establishment religion and must fight its way to success (Stark 1987, 1996).

In order to succeed, every individual in the new faith community represented by the Qur'ān must engage in *jihād*. This, as noted above, means striving to support the community of believers in a variety of ways, from demonstrating religious loyalty through certain behaviors and rituals, and providing it with material resources and political support, to engaging in military battle against its enemies. All of this is *jihād* in the path of God.

The Range of Qur'ānic Articulations of War

The Qur'ān presents a variety of positions on relations with opponents of the emerging Muslim community, ranging from calls to ignore those who deny the truth of God and oppose his prophet (Q 6:106), to preaching to them (Q 16:125), to in some cases killing them (Q 2:191). The many disparate verses are found in dozens of chapters and in a variety of topical and stylistic contexts. As can be observed from the tenor of the verses just cited, many appear to be in conflict with one another, and both traditional Muslim and Western scholars have found their range of meanings and the policies commanded by them worthy of study and comment. The following is a sample of some of the classic verses arranged in general categories.

Non-militant (non-confrontational) verses

Q 5:13 For their breaking their covenant,³ we cursed them and hardened their hearts. They change words from their contexts and forget some of what they were reminded. You will continue to uncover treachery from all but a few of them, but be forgiving and pardon, for God loves the kindly.

Q 6:106 Follow what has been revealed to you from your Lord; there is no God but He; and turn away from the idolaters (*al-mushrikīn*).

Q 15:94–5 Profess openly what you have been commanded, and turn away from the idolaters, for We are sufficient for you against the scoffers.

Q 16:125 Invite (all) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and dispute with them in ways that are best and most gracious: For your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, and who receives guidance.

Restrictions on fighting (or fighting in defense)

Q 2:190 Fight in the path of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits (*walā ta'dadū*); for God does not love transgressors.

Q 9:36 Surely, the number of months in the sight of God is twelve [written] in the book of God the day He created the heavens and the earth. Of them, four are sacred. That is the right religion, so do not wrong each other during them; but fight the idolaters all together just as they fight you all together,⁴ and know that God is with those who are God-fearing.

Q 22:39–40 Permission is given to those who fight⁵ because they have been wronged – God is Most Powerful for their aid – those who have been unjustly expelled from their homes only because they say: “Our Lord is God.” For if not for God’s repelling some of the people by the means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques in which the name of God is often mentioned would surely have been destroyed. God will indeed help the one who helps him – surely God is strong, mighty.

Conflict between God’s command and the response of the people

Q 2:216 Fighting is commanded you even though it is hateful to you. But it is possible that you hate something that is good for you and that you love something that is bad for you. God knows, but you know not!

Q 3:156 O you who believe! Do not be like the deniers who said of their brethren who went out in the land or went on raids: If they had been [home] with us they would not have died or been killed; that God may make it anguish in their hearts. God gives life and causes death; and God sees what you do!

Q 4:75 What is (wrong) with you that you do not fight in the path of God when weak men, women and children are crying: “Our Lord! Bring us out of this town of evil people and give us from Your presence a protector! Oh, give us a defender!”

Q 9:42 Had the gain been nearby and the journey easy, they would indeed have followed you, but the distance (seemed) too great to them. Yet they swear by God: "If we could, we would have set out with you." They destroy themselves. God surely knows they are liars.

Verses strongly advocating war for God's religion (unconditional war)

Q 2:191 Kill them wherever you find them and expel them from where they have expelled you out, for *fitna*⁶ is worse than killing, but do not fight them at the sacred mosque unless they fight you there. But if they fight you, kill them. Such is the reward of the unbelievers.

Q 8:39 And fight them until there is no more *fitna*, and religion becomes God's in its entirety. But if they cease, God sees what they do. (cf. Q 2:193)

Q 9:5 When the sacred months are past, kill the idolaters wherever you find them, and seize them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush; but if they repent, observe the prayer, and give the alms tax, then let them go their way, for God is Forgiving, Merciful.

Q 9:29 Fight those who do not believe in God or the Last Day, and who do not forbid what has been forbidden by God and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of truth from among the People of the Book, until they pay the poll tax (*al-jizya*) out of hand, having been brought low.

Q 9:73/66:9 O prophet! Strive (*jāhid*) against the unbelievers and the dissenters (*al-munāfiqīn*), and be ruthless with them. Their refuge is Hell, an evil destination.

These verses and many others treating relations with non-believers occur in many different chapters and in a variety of contexts. Not only do the verses treating relations with non-believers show no evidence of any particular organization *in situ*, they seem inconsistent and even contradictory. The organization provided above is imposed on the verses by this writer, and, in fact, a number of distinct organizing principles could be applied to them that would result in different categories than those given here. The fact of the matter is that the great breadth of outlook expressed in the Qur'ān regarding unbelievers is problematic and difficult to decipher (Firestone 1999: 47–97). Qur'ānic regard toward unbelievers is inconsistent and even at times contradictory, suggesting perhaps that their source is inconsistent and self-contradictory, something apparently impossible for an omniscient and omnipotent monotheistic deity.

This problem troubled early Muslim Qur'ān scholars, who found apparent contradiction in the Qur'ān intolerable. The solution that emerged was to match the revelations with an emerging biography of Muḥammad (Firestone 1999: 99–125). According to this schema, the verses legislating behaviors toward non-believers were considered to have been revealed according to a particular chronology. The earlier verses counseled quietism and preaching, or perhaps arguing with those who denied the prophethood of Muḥammad and the religion he represented. Very purposefully, they did not counsel militancy toward Muḥammad's enemies. Over time, however, the revelations then became increasingly aggressive. This increase in belligerency matched the increasing size and power of the community of believers.

Early on, while still in Mecca, the emerging faith community was weak and could only ignore those who railed against them and their new religion. As Muḥammad's confidence grew, they could argue against their opponents; they could begin preaching to them. But they remained a weak community and suffered both verbal and physical humiliation at the hands of their enemies in Mecca. They were powerless to defend themselves. Finally, they were expelled from their Meccan home and found refuge in the settlements of Medina.

In Medina, the community of believers was free from the immediate physical threat of their Meccan enemies. They grew in numbers and strength under Medinan protection, and at this point, the revelations began to allow fighting in defense of the community. As they continued to increase in strength and numbers, the revelations continued to evolve in response. The next stage was one in which the community of believers was permitted to initiate attack, but only against known enemies and with clear limits to the rules of engagement. Presumably, this meant the traditional restriction from fighting during certain months of the year and other pre-Islamic customs. Finally, as the community became increasingly powerful politically and militarily, it was commanded to go out and fight their opponents wherever they could be found in order to dominate the region of Arabia where they were located.

According to this representation, what looked like confusion or contradiction in the Qur'ān was actually testimony to God's great wisdom as He prudently guided His prophet and community. When aggression would have been dangerous and self-destructive, it was forbidden. As it became a successful means of building up the community, it was allowed and then commanded incrementally. This solved the problem of contradiction. The earlier verses were revealed in order to guide the prophet and his community according to the needs of the hour, but they were only intended by God to be temporary. They were superseded when later verses were revealed that articulated a more aggressive position. It was natural to assume that later verses abrogated earlier verses, and this became a general rule. The goal, therefore, was to determine the chronology of revelation.

Two literatures grew out of this need in the second–third/eighth–ninth centuries. One, called “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), took certain verses and placed their revelation into the emerging history of Muḥammad's life (see Rippin 1985b; *EI2* 2004: “Qur'ān,” 415–16). The other, usually called “abrogating and abrogated (Qur'ānic verses)” (*EI2* 2004: “naskh”; Burton 1977, 1990; Powers 1988), identified certain verses that appeared to contradict one another and determined which abrogated which. The study of abrogation worked well to solve problems of apparent contradiction, not only for the verses treating relations with non-believers, but for a number of other thorny issues such as inheritance, the consumption of alcohol, and so forth.

The problem with this solution to the problem of apparent contradiction, from the perspective of Western historiography, is that it is circular. It places Qur'ānic revelations in relation to the biography of the prophet, but the prophetic biography that we know today was constructed, in significant part, because of the very problems associated with Qur'ānic chronology. All three endeavors – determining the chronology of revelation, resolving problems of apparent contradiction through the theory of abrogation, and the writing of the prophetic biography by collecting and organizing oral traditions – were

occurring around the same time. Consciously or not, they worked together to solve difficult textual and theological problems.

It has been suggested by some critical scholars (most recently by Afsaruddin 2013), that the narrative suggesting linear development of increasing militancy was imposed upon the text of the Qurʾān by later Muslim scholars committed to the ideology of expansionist *jihād*. According to this position, the ninth–tenth centuries marked a turning point during which an earlier and less militant interpretation of the Qurʾān was superseded by an interpretive, eisegetical narrative intended to justify empire that is not original to the contextual layer of the Qurʾān itself.

Now, as we return to the issue of relations with non-believers, we conclude with the observation that organizing principles other than prophetic biography could also be applied to the discrepant verses. Many are possible. One way to organize the verses, for example, is according to processes of group formation. As growing communities form around leadership, even charismatic leadership, they tend to form smaller sub-groups within the larger community. The breakdown naturally occurs around gender, age and other factors. In the case of emergent religious communities these factors typically include differing approaches to ritual activities or eating customs and expectations, differences in personal association with factions within the leadership, or attitudes regarding how individuals or the group as a whole should relate to people who do not belong to the group.

It is clear, for example, that a large number of verses in several chapters show evidence of disagreement over whether the believers should go out on military campaigns against non-believers (see above and Firestone 1999: 77–84). Verses such as Q 9:38–9 complain about the great lack of enthusiasm among some believers regarding this endeavor:

O believers! What is the matter with you that when it is said to you: “March out in the path of God,” you are weighed down to the ground?! Are you so satisfied with the life of this world over the Hereafter? The enjoyment of the life of this world is but little [when compared] to the Hereafter. If you do not march forth He will afflict you with a painful punishment and will substitute another people instead of you! You cannot harm Him at all, but God has power over everything. (See also Q 3:156; 4:72–7.)

Those not wishing to go out on campaigns are described as selfish, petty, or simply afraid and lacking faith. It is quite possible, however, that they had alternative reasons for resisting this requirement of the new religion. Perhaps some, as in the early Jesus movement, were attracted to the prophet and his religion for quietist spiritual reasons and did not consider warring to be a valid activity for the new community. Some, according to Q 3:167–8, claimed that they knew nothing of fighting.

It is quite possible, therefore, that the Qurʾān is attesting to the fact that the young community of believers simply had not settled on their communal position over how to relate to non-believers, and were divided into factions whose positions were articulated through the different, even conflicting, revelations. When confronted with the problem of enemies desiring to impede the success of the new community, some may have been quietist or even pacifist, others willing to fight only in defense, and others interested in transferring the warrior nature of pre-Islamic tribalism to the new trans-kinship

“tribe” (*umma*) of believers. The Qurʾān certainly attests to different opinions regarding relations with non-believers. It is clear that however these differences were expressed during the period of emergent Islam, the militant position became dominant. The militant view then became codified during the period of empire when divine authority and justification for imperial armies was of great importance to the state (Peters 1996: 4–5; Afsaruddin 2013: 5–7).

Qurʾān and *Jihād* in the Contemporary Period

By the end of the third/ninth century when the formative period of Islam was coming to a close, a consensus developed among most Muslim religious scholars that the essential questions of Islamic law had been thoroughly discussed and finally settled. Henceforth, no one was deemed to have the necessary qualifications for independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) in law. Only explanation and application would be allowed, or at most, interpretation of doctrine as it had already been established. This consensus would be articulated to this day as the “closing of the gate of *ijtihād*” (EI2 2004: “*idjtiḥād*”).

The truth of the matter, however, is that independent reasoning in Qurʾān interpretation has continued at one level or another to this day and is currently very active. The very same issues, for example, that are sources of discussion and change in the West have an impact on the Islamic world. These include the role of women, government, religion and state, economics, and, most certainly, *jihād* and relations with non-believers. As with the religious reformers who so radically transformed Christianity and Judaism in previous centuries, increasing numbers of Muslims today engage in quite independent reading of their scripture. The results of their inquiries vary, without doubt, and this is most certainly the case with regard to *jihād* and relations with non-believers.

Views on *jihād* have become polarized in the last decade, with the continuing attraction of modernity among a considerable segment of the Muslim world on the one hand, and the growing militant reaction of others against the threat of the West on the other. An extreme militant interpretation of the Qurʾān on relations with non-believers was articulated by Osama bin Laden in his famous *fatwā*, issued on February 23, 1998,⁷ and in other contexts. A modernist reading of some of the same verses arrives at a radically different conclusion (Safi 2001). The process of finding, renewing, and forming personal meaning from the verses of the Qurʾān will continue for as long as the Qurʾān exists, for constructing meaning is a part of the essentiality of being human, and applying the process to scripture is integral to the spirituality of the scriptural religions.

Notes

- 1 Fighting (*qitāl*) in the path of God is the most frequent verb connected with the phrase, *in the path of God*, in the Qurʾān, occurring twelve times. *Jihād* in the path of God occurs eight times, as does emigrating in the path of God. Expending personal resources occurs seven times, and being killed occurs three times. Laments or complaints about people being turned away from the path of God occur fully two dozen times.

- 2 This schema is the “ideal-typical” phenomenology of scriptural revelation. The narrative that tells of the giving of the Hebrew Bible (a “pre-scriptural scripture”), and the response to it, is somewhat different because the Hebrew Bible emerges into the light of scripture from an earlier life as what might best be called a sacred national literature.
- 3 The previous verse refers to the Children of Israel.
- 4 *Kāffat*^{am}. Or “fight the idolaters during all [these months] just as they fight you during all [of them].” Another reading has “engage in fighting the idolaters as a unified army, just as they engage in fighting you as a unified army.” The difficulty is in determining what *kāffat* refers to.
- 5 Or, “those who have been fought against.” The difference between the active and passive form of the verb depends on a minor change in the pointing of the text.
- 6 Lit. “temptation,” translations of *fitna* tend to be rendered to fit the context. “Persecution” is a common translation here, though it is defined by Muslim exegetes as idolatry or dissension in other verses.
- 7 Published in the London-based Arabic newspaper *Al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, February 23, 1998. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/fatw2.htm>. English translation: <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>.

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PART IV

Interpretation

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CHAPTER 25

Hermeneutics: al-Thaʿlabī

Walid Saleh

Al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035) is perhaps one of the most important Qurʾān exegetes of the medieval Islamic world. The legacy of his Qurʾān commentary, *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (“The Unveiling and Elucidation in Qurʾānic Interpretation”; henceforth *al-Kashf*) has only recently begun to be studied. Al-Thaʿlabī’s work ushered in the high classical style of Qurʾānic commentary, and for centuries it remained the major source for later exegetes, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, through direct channels or indirectly. Moreover, *al-Kashf*, for reasons I will explain later in this chapter, would become the Sunnī work most widely utilized and abused by Shīʿī polemicists in their wars with the Sunnīs. This prompted Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) to launch a blistering critique of al-Thaʿlabī in an attempt to circumvent the Shīʿī use of his work. Eventually, Sunnī scholars downgraded the importance of *al-Kashf* and ceased to consider it mainstream. By the time Sunnī Muslim historians of Qurʾānic exegesis were writing the history of the genre, al-Thaʿlabī had become *persona non grata* in the field.

The history of *al-Kashf*’s legacy thus documents the development of the genre of *tafsīr* as well as Sunnī–Shīʿī polemical wars. The recent edition and publication of *al-Kashf* by a Shīʿī scholar has only complicated the checkered history of this work. With the increased intensity of Sunnī–Shīʿī polemic in the last decades, modern Shīʿī scholars who had become aware of the significance of this work hurriedly prepared it for publication (al-Thaʿlabī 2002). The result is an abysmal edition which is useless for purposes of a close study of the work. Thus one of the major medieval Qurʾān commentaries is still unavailable in a critical edition (Saleh 2004: 229–42). Moreover, copies of this inferior edition are hard to locate.

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān, Second Edition.

Edited by Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi.

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Several features of *al-Kashf* made the prominent role it played in the history of Qur'ānic exegesis possible. First, al-Tha'labī did not just write a new commentary; rather, he started by assessing the whole field and evaluating its salient trends. The introduction of *al-Kashf* represents an important moment in the development of the art of Qur'ānic exegesis: it adopts a self-reflective stance and offers a detailed discussion of the field as it then stood. Readers are fully informed of what al-Tha'labī thought of the major figures in the field and why he excluded certain currents (namely, the Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* tradition). Moreover, he is one of a handful of medieval exegetes who listed all of his sources in detail. He utilized over a hundred books, in addition to his personal notes from the lectures of over 300 other scholars with whom he had studied. The introduction to his commentary is thus an articulate assessment of the status of the field on the eve of the fifth/eleventh century (Goldfeld 1984). The fastidiousness of his exhaustive listing of sources was never matched: not content to use one version of a certain work, he used all the available recensions – in one instance four different versions of the same work. To the degree that he collected his material independently from al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), we are now in a position to use *al-Kashf* in conjunction with al-Ṭabarī's work to study the early phase of Qur'ānic exegesis. Moreover, by incorporating the material made available since the publication of al-Ṭabarī's work, *al-Kashf* preserves the collective engagement of Muslim intellectuals with the Qur'ān up to the fifth century. As a source for the fourth century, *al-Kashf* is indispensable. Finally, by dropping the *isnāds* without sacrificing the content, later exegetes, who were by then less concerned with *isnāds*, preferred al-Tha'labī as the source for early material. *Al-Kashf* was a handy and irresistible source for these exegetes, as it contained most of al-Ṭabarī's material and more.

An abundance of sources alone, however, could hardly account for such an epoch-making work. *Al-Kashf* was influential because it offered a resolution to many of the problems facing the Sunnī hermeneutical enterprise, resolutions that proved adaptable and convincing because they were intellectually cogent. Al-Tha'labī's reformulation of the craft of interpretation was to transform the field and – to the degree that one can measure influence in a field where so many of the sources are still unedited – his is apparent in the whole spectrum of the medieval exegetical tradition. Al-Tha'labī's resolution of the hermeneutical impasse of Sunnism proved effective through six major interpretive strategies. First, he refused the temptation to effect a rupture between Sunnī hermeneutics and philology. Second, he allowed *tafsīr*, and hence the Qur'ān, to accommodate all the major trends in pietistic Sunnism. Third, he integrated a narrative style of interpretation into the philological system. Fourth, he turned exegesis into an explicitly polemical tool against the non-Sunnī camps. Fifth, he welded the prophetic corpus of *ḥadīth* to the craft of exegesis. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he transformed *tafsīr* into a sophisticated discipline that absorbed new intellectual challenges from outside Sunnism, digested them, and rendered them mainstream and innocuous. Al-Tha'labī's transformation of *tafsīr* as a discipline, I believe, shows the degree to which *tafsīr* was at the center of the intellectual life of medieval Sunnī Islam; the failure of modern scholars to incorporate the study of this genre into the general intellectual history of medieval Islam is thus unfortunate. I will

proceed to outline the six major interpretive strategies through which al-Tha'labī sought to resolve the hermeneutical impasse of Sunnism.

The Détente with Philology

The discovery of philology early on in the Arabo-Islamic tradition has rarely been accorded the revolutionary cultural significance it deserves. Philology's role in undermining any facile dogmatic interpretation of the Qur'ān was not negligible. One only need to compare the content of Muqātil b. Sulaymān's (d. 150/767) and al-Ṭabarī's commentaries to realize how professional the tone of the craft had become by al-Ṭabarī's time. The existence of a corpus of pre-Islamic literature made for a more difficult situation. One did not fear offending God or the 'ulamā' by admitting to the content of this pagan literature and its worldview: wine, hubris, debauchery, and idolatry were all there to start with, and one was spared the urge to twist the rules of philology in order to transform an abhorrent image. A philology honed on this corpus was soon to acquire an irreverence that was barely in check when confronted with any other text, even if it was divine speech. The philological Geist of the age soon forced the Sunnī exegetes to postulate that Qur'ānic interpretation must be based on philology, yet they were not so naïve as to let a tool so untethered take full charge of their craft. The early, pre-philological phase of the tradition was not dropped. In so far as it encapsulated a proto-Sunnī worldview, this layer was actually enshrined as canonical. As such, however, there lurked within mainstream Sunnī hermeneutics the danger of philology running amuck. Sunnī hermeneutics, by paying more than mere lip service to the role of philology in its method, was always but one step removed from theological disaster, should an exegete submit fully to the dictates of this tool at the expense of orthodoxy. While *tafsīr* forced the birth of Arabic philology, in many ways Arabic philology came back to haunt it. Philology in the last resort was not a loyal servant for it could easily show the flimsy foundations of many of the proto-Sunnī interpretations.

The fundamental claim to authority that *tafsīr* as a discipline presented to the intellectual elite was that it was a philological explanation of the Qur'ān. As such, it presupposed that any reader of the Qur'ān, who was sufficiently versed in Arabic, would reach the same conclusions that the Sunnī exegetes offered. Read philologically, the Qur'ān, Sunnī exegetes maintained, offered a Sunnī worldview. This self-presentation and assessment is, of course, easy to refute. *Tafsīr* was primarily a doctrinal enterprise that used philology as one of its tools. Sunnī hermeneutics was thus based on a paradox: philology was proclaimed the tool needed to understand the Qur'ān, yet philology was not allowed to be the final arbiter of any interpretation. Sunnī hermeneutics, in order to save its own theological reading of the Qur'ān and to present a coherent interpretation, was ultimately willing to discard any philological reading (although it had always maintained that philology was the way to understand the Qur'ān) whenever it threatened to undermine a Sunnī theological reading not supported by philology.

In his monumental exegetical work, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, al-Ṭabarī offered the two currents of interpretation, theological and philological, side by side, pretending that one did not

negate the other. In his work, al-Thaʿlabī managed to refine the appearance of the Sunnī exegetical enterprise and to make it, through pseudo-philological methods, conform more fully to the dictates of philology. Rhetoric, a rising new discipline, was also admitted; the influence of the philologists and their new lexicons is apparent in *al-Kashf*. Far more significant was al-Thaʿlabī’s willingness to discard any traditionally inherited interpretation that was blatantly unsound philologically, as long as dropping it posed no dogmatic retreat or change in the Sunnī worldview. Moreover, poetry in its form as literature (*adab*), not merely as a handmaid to philology, was also allowed to appear in the context of Qurʾānic interpretation. Poetry, the pinnacle of human creativity, was given a place inside *tafsīr* not only as a tool but as a self-contained artistic manifestation. The combined effect of these decisions was to give mainstream Qurʾānic exegesis a philological gravitas it had hitherto lacked (Saleh 2004: 130–40).

We should keep in mind that two other options were available to al-Thaʿlabī to resolve the clash between philology and theology. The first was a loosening of the bond between Sunnī hermeneutics and philology, an option that was an exceedingly attractive one for Sunnī ideologues. Shīʿī and Ṣūfī hermeneutics had done that already, showing that such a move was not only feasible, but had no apparent disadvantages. The other extreme was also tempting: a realignment of Sunnism so as to conform to a more thorough philological reading of the Qurʾān. Yet, both would have resulted in a profound intellectual loss and the desertion of two major tenets of Sunnism: conservatism and intellectual hubris. Al-Thaʿlabī was thus the architect of a major resolution to this perennial tug-of-war between philology and dogma, and his solution was and remains the happy medium that Sunnism claims. However, it should be mentioned that the two other options were also attempted within Sunnism, if only after al-Thaʿlabī. Al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), al-Thaʿlabī’s main student, did try in his magnum opus *al-Basīṭ* to align Sunnism with a philological reading of the Qurʾān. The attempt left him in a frenzied, albeit productive, intellectual crisis which he never seemed to have resolved. Ibn Taymiyya chose the other solution and dropped philology from his hermeneutical manifesto, thus consolidating (or possibly giving rise to) one of the major competing trends inside Sunnī hermeneutics, which I have termed radical hermeneutics (Saleh 2004: 205–27).

Tafsīr and Pietistic Sensibilities

If there is a leitmotif in al-Thaʿlabī’s hermeneutics, it is the proclamation of the salvific message of the Qurʾān. Every verse is a potential herald of God’s mercy and compassion towards the believers. Moreover, for him, faith entailed an ontological differentiation between the believers and the rest of humanity, and al-Thaʿlabī was determined to render this differentiation hermeneutically operative. Both of these features were also emphasized by the dogma of the intercession of Muḥammad (*shafāʿa*) on behalf of his community, which he embedded into the meaning of the Qurʾān. *Tafsīr* left little doubt that a Muslim, no matter what, could not be eternally damned. Pietistic Sunnism, meanwhile, had transformed the recitation of the Qurʾān into one of the highest forms of devotion; despite the protestations of the *ḥadīth* camp that most of the prophetic traditions that

supported such a view were fabricated, the sentiment was too strong not to prevail. Al-Tha'labī accordingly began his exegesis of every *sūra* in the Qur'ān by recounting such traditions. Mere recitation was proclaimed salvation here. The all-engulfing salvific quality of reciting the Qur'ān, once unleashed, could not be contained, and reading parts of the Qur'ān became as efficacious as reading all of it. What the traditions cited by al-Tha'labī were implying was that the Qur'ān is, at once, an all-encompassing and a self-encompassing instrument of salvation, such that a part represents the whole and the whole is reducible to certain parts. The collective redemptive powers of the Qur'ān are thus attainable by reading portions of it. This synecdochic aspect of the Qur'ān can make sense only on the salvific plane: redemption comes complete to the believer (Saleh 2004: 103–8). The result of this view was to allow the Qur'ān to compete with other forms of devotion that were being developed by the likes of the Sūfis.

Moreover, al-Tha'labī made sure that the content of the verses themselves declared an affirmation of the *najāh* (salvation) that awaited the faithful. Al-Tha'labī took pains to show this aspect of the Qur'ān where one least expected it. Here, the ability of the exegete to make the Qur'ān confirm the primary message that Sunnism wanted it to convey was supreme. The technique of achieving this was carried out in two forms: positive and negative. The positive approach was to find salvific import in an otherwise innocuously non-salvific verse; the negative was to confine the import of harsh divine pronouncements about recalcitrant human nature to non-believers, hence to make sure to differentiate the believers ontologically from the non-believers.

I will start by giving examples of the positive approach. Q 55:19, which states, “He [God] let forth the two seas that meet together,” was understood by all exegetes up to al-Tha'labī's time as a reference to salt and fresh water seas, and al-Tha'labī offers interpretations that reflect this understanding. Having disposed of the traditional interpretations, however, he offers a new meaning: “There exists between human creatures (*al-'abd*) and his Lord two seas. The first one is the sea of salvation (*al-najāh*) and it is the Qur'ān; whoever upholds the Qur'ān is saved. The second is the sea of perdition (*halāk*) and it is this world; whoever grasps on to it and takes it as his resort, he shall perish.” Let us untangle this interpretation. First, al-Tha'labī was drawing on the Qur'ān's presentation of the sea as paradigmatic of human life. The many statements in the Qur'ān of human defeat in front of the mysteries of the seas have already made the sea a synonym of both God's wrath and his benevolence (Q 17:66–70). To safely journey through the seas is totally predicated on God's love and mercy. Since life itself is presented as a journey, then crossing a sea becomes part of the march of the faithful towards salvation. Moreover, the sea was used as a metonymic image of God's word in the Qur'ān (Q 18:109; 31:27). The interpretation offered by al-Tha'labī is thus a brilliant reconfiguration of the myriad uses of the sea in the Qur'ān and salvation becomes a journey through a sea that both is the Qur'ān and can only be traversed by the Qur'ān itself. There is also an echo here of the prophetic catechetical view of the Qur'ān as both the judge and the prosecutor. Notice how the world, hence the *terra firma*, becomes an image of a sea of perdition, for although it is firm it can still inundate and drown one in its fatal attractions (Saleh 2004: 109). The reality of salvation is thus counterintuitive. It is important to emphasize that nothing in the verse supports such an elaborate reading, apart from the word “sea.”

Another example of this positive salvific interpretation is how al-Tha'labī understood Q 93:5, “The Lord shall give thee [Muḥammad], and thou shalt be satisfied.” The verse is rhetorically cold towards the believers; this was an intimate conversation between God and Muḥammad, and the believers are nowhere in the picture. God, despite all his protestation that His face is facing all humanity, is all too focused on Muḥammad. Al-Tha'labī ensured that the believer intrudes into these moments of intimacy between God and Muḥammad, and so he turned the verse into nothing but a reference to the believers' salvation. Al-Tha'labī adduced a tradition which states that Muḥammad can only be satisfied if none of his followers remains in hell (Saleh 2004: 124–7). This was vintage al-Tha'labī: God's mercy and Muḥammad's intercession were made into one here; this interpretation was also an implicit attack on a major tenet of Mu'tazilite doctrine that the grave sinner will be damned for eternity.

An example of the negative salvific interpretation is how al-Tha'labī dealt with Q 102:1–2, “striving for acquiring more [wealth] distracts you until you visit your graves.” The whole tone of *sūra* 102 is recriminatory towards humanity. Greed blinds human beings to see that death is at hand and that the reckoning on the day of judgment would entail an account of how wealth was spent. Human beings are depicted as recalcitrant, unbending, and unimaginative. Certitude of what life is about comes only at a belated moment of recognition (Q 102:5). To leave this *sūra* as it is, is to raise questions about faith's ability to transform human nature. Al-Tha'labī thus offered an interpretation of the verses that limits their reference to pre-Islamic Arabs or Jews. In either case, they are not about death making human life vain, but about the greed that blinds the unfaithful. The believers are thus immune from such an assessment, and to the degree that the faithful are not implicated in this scenario, they are a different order of beings (Saleh 2004: 162–4).

The other aspect of pietistic Sunnism that al-Tha'labī made *tafsīr* accommodate was the admonitory sensibility and its rhetoric. In doing so, al-Tha'labī extended trends already present in the Qur'ān. The aim here was to transform the whole rhetoric of the Qur'ān into such a discourse. Although I have chosen the word “admonitory,” I am in reality describing two complementary rhetorical stratagems: one admonitory, the other exhortatory, or what is known in Islamic pietistic literature as *tarhīb* (instilling fear) and *targhīb* (instilling hope). Moreover, woven into these two rhetorical modes of interpretation was an affirmation of the dictates of the *sharī'a*: one is also cajoled and pushed into fulfilling the obligations imposed by God's law. This aspect of *al-Kashf* was a major factor in its popularity. The work is uncanny in its mixture of the high philological tone and the common voice of the pietistic tradition. At the moment one is drawn into reading a long list of vocabulary, gathered by philologists, about the stages of human life, one is reminded of the ephemeral quality of this life. It is mostly in these admonitory sections that pietistic poetry was cited by al-Tha'labī.

Narration and Exegesis

One of the remarkable features of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics was his refining of methods already in existence in the tradition to suit the new tastes of his audience. Nothing shows this skill more than his transformation of narrative elements in *tafsīr*

into a coherent, highly developed technique. This he did in two ways: the first was to elaborate on elements already present in the narrative parts of the Qur'ān itself and turn them into artistic productions (for more on this see chapter 26 in this volume on his "Tales of the Prophets"). This is what I would call the grand narrative technique, where a repeated story in the Qur'ān is developed in one instance to cover the story concerned, thus giving a full narrative of what would be a recurring story in the Qur'ān. The second was the micro-narrative style, in which a narrative unit, complete in its elements, was used to explain a particular verse without it appearing in other contexts and, more importantly, without apparent connection to the verse in question. This technique I have termed fictive narrative (Saleh 2004: 161–6).

The second of these two methods can be illustrated as follows. Q 93:7, "Did he not find you erring (*ḍāll^m*, literally "lost") and guide you," generated unease among Muslim commentators, for it alluded to (if it did not state) the pagan past of Muḥammad. This would have been unproblematic were it not for the development of the doctrine of the infallibility of Muḥammad, which in its more strict forms denied that Muḥammad could have been a pagan before he was called to prophecy. The ways in which commentators sought to change the meaning of this verse are varied. Most of the solutions offered to undo this verse were at odds with the meaning of the word *ḍāll^m*; thus philology was always undermining these techniques even when not actively doing so. Why not defeat philology at its own game? Could it be that Muḥammad was physically lost? Why not understand the term in its original lexicographic meaning, denuding it of its acquired metaphoric meaning, and use the very method of philology to defeat it? Could it not be that Muḥammad was lost when he was a child, something that happens to every child at one time or another? Crude as this ploy sounds, it has many advantages. It is philologically sound, and if a story could be found, or invented, to support it, the story would not be implausible. Al-Tha'labī offers five such stories. Each tells the story of Muḥammad being lost when he was a child, then found again and reunited with his grandfather. The first represents the earliest level of the invention of this interpretation: Muḥammad was lost in the valleys of Mecca and then God guided him back to his grandfather. This is a skeletal story, whose aim is to undo the verse, and little heed was given to the narrative structure and development of the story. By the time we reach the fifth story, however, we have a long narration that weaves together various motifs to create a miraculous childhood story of the grand savior of humanity. The whole cosmos is now implicated in the drama of this prophet; the universe is alerted to the disappearance of this child; the old gods of Arabia are fearful of him being found again, and refuse to answer a quest for an oracle of his whereabouts; and a heavenly voice, no less, guides the grandfather to the hiding place of this child. He was found under a blessed tree, in a contemplative mood, eating from the blessed leaves of this tree.

The fictive narrative method employed many strategies to achieve plausibility. When necessary, the meaning of a phrase was taken literally instead of figuratively, or the opposite – a figurative use of a word was chosen and the literal discarded, even though such a reading was not supported by the rhetorical Arabic tradition. Ethnographic information, poetic citation, and detailed dramatization, including dialogues and monologues, were all employed to make the narrative coherent. It should be clear that fictive narrative interpretation was an attractive exegetical method since there were no restrictive hermeneutical rules on the exegete save coherence.

Exegesis and Theology

To state that medieval Qur'ānic interpretation was theological is to state the obvious, especially if what we mean by theology is the bolstering of a system of belief. What I am referring to here is, however, a far more explicit articulation of the aims of exegesis as both definer and defender of a theological outlook. Al-Tha'labī introduced theology, or at least a more explicit theological outlook, into *tafsīr*. He rarely let an opportunity to explain how Sunnism understood a certain verse, what Sunnism thought of this or that theological point, or how others had gotten it wrong, pass him by. If there was an enemy to attack, it was Mu'tazilite theology and, to a lesser degree, the Shī'ites. Al-Tha'labī never tired of vilifying these camps, their views and doctrines. Moreover, al-Tha'labī achieved the inclusion of theology in *tafsīr* without turning to the language of scholastic *kalām* in his theological discussions. Here, he showed his true colors as a brilliant cultural ideologue who, while versed in the language of theology, was willing to simplify it for an audience that lacked the training for such a discipline.

I will here give just one example of his subtle way of achieving this. Q 31:27, which reads, "Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea [was ink] – seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the words of God not be spent. God is All-hearing, All-seeing," was understood by al-Ṭabarī to refer to God's word itself, and not to its nature. Al-Tha'labī meanwhile achieved two things when he offered an explanation of this verse. First, he read it as an affirmation of the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, and second, he saw in it a legitimizing statement for the craft of exegesis. He stated that "this verse implies that the word of God is uncreated because that which is without end to it or to what relates to it (or is connected to it), i.e., its meaning, is uncreated." Here a *kalām* concept which states that infinite things cannot be created was used to argue that God's word, since it was declared inexhaustible and thus infinite in quantity, must be uncreated. Both the *kalām* concept and its corollary were here presented in a catechetical style, easy to digest and consent to, and thus required little background in theology (Saleh 2004: 1). Al-Tha'labī opened the door for later exegetes to build on this approach, and to the degree that Sunnism saw the need later to turn exegesis into a "kalāmized" discipline it offered such a transformation in the work of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209).

Prophetic *Ḥadīth* and *Tafsīr*

At the heart of the hermeneutical enterprise of al-Tha'labī lies his weaving together of two of the fundamental facets of the medieval Islamic religious traditions: the prophetic *ḥadīth* and the enterprise of Qur'ānic exegesis.¹ This fusion was in a sense the culmination of the process of integration of the different aspects of the Islamic culture in medieval times. The prophetic *ḥadīth*, an edifice that was nearing its completion through both the production of massive compilations and the elaboration of the science of *ḥadīth* (*ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*), stood apart, as it were, from Qur'ānic exegesis as it reached its first grand articulation in the commentary of al-Ṭabarī. Al-Tha'labī brought the two together and initiated what was to be a continuous relationship between the two streams of medieval

productions. The two revelations, the written and the prophetic or oral, were reunited, thus creating in the hermeneutical event a structure resembling the character of Muḥammad, who was the only individual in whom both were once united: the Qur'ān (present as lemmas) and the *sunna* (present as exegesis) made into one. The Qur'ān, read through the prophetic *sunna*, became, like Muḥammad once was, the incarnation of that which would guide the Muslim nation. The formulation of *tafsīr* as the embodiment of both divine revelation and prophetic revelation necessarily made it a replacement of Muḥammad, his true caliph or successor who was to lead the community. The failure of the Caliphate on the religious level opened the door to a structuring of religious knowledge as Muḥammad's successor. In *tafsīr* the Sunnī community had, in effect, its immanent prophet through textual fiat.

There are here two issues that need to be addressed; the first is that most of the innovations introduced by al-Tha'labī were effected through the citation of prophetic *ḥadīth*. When a verse was read to declare God's mercy and offer salvation to the believers, invariably it was read in this way through the agency of a *ḥadīth* or a prophetic tradition. Thus for example, Q 93:7, which I have already presented, was read through the eyes of a *ḥadīth*, as discussed above. Moreover, the admonitory rhetorical style was already highly developed in *ḥadīth*, and al-Tha'labī only needed to transport this device wholesale into his work. The other issue that deserves mentioning is the consequences that this binding of the two revelations posed to Sunnī hermeneutics. If allowed supremacy, this method could overhaul the Sunnī hermeneutical project, and implicit in this method was a capitulation to the prophetic *ḥadīth* as the decipherer of divine speech. As long as the prophetic interpretive method was embedded in an encyclopedic approach that was guided by philology, it was always a controllable method. The danger was to follow through with the implicit foundation of such a method: the equating of the meaning of the word of God with the prophetic word to the exclusion of any other possible hermeneutical approach into the Qur'ān. Given the abundance of prophetic *logia*, it was only a matter of time before the one inundated the other. This possibility and approach are what I have termed "radical hermeneutics," and one of the most intriguing issues for *tafsīr* scholarship is to investigate the history of this hermeneutical radicalization. For the time being I am still convinced that such a method did not see its full articulation until the appearance of Ibn Taymiyya. But another candidate might well be Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938). In either case, the significance of al-Tha'labī remains central. He either anticipated the trend, if my assessment holds, or al-Tha'labī curbed it for at least four centuries, if I am wrong. His resolution, however, remains the default position of most of the encyclopedic exegetical tradition and as such ensured a heavy counterbalance to the unavoidable later prominence of radical hermeneutics.

Tafsīr as the Absorber of New Challenges to Sunnism

The main contention of my assessment of the cultural significance of medieval *tafsīr* is that *tafsīr* was the medium through which Sunnism absorbed and appropriated any new development in Islamo-Arabic culture. *Tafsīr* started with philology, which was

fully put in the service of interpreting the word of God, yet without *tafsīr* fully submitting to philology's unbending rules. Theology, which could have been simply rejected through a negative theology, an option made possible through the work of the Ḥanbalites, was instead appropriated and its premises, if not its difficult language, admitted into *tafsīr*. (Of course with al-Rāzī the language of scholastic theology became the language of *tafsīr* itself, and as such *tafsīr* was willing to discard even its character in order to overcome any intellectual challenge.) My contention is that *tafsīr* was making the whole world comprehensible by making an understanding of the world seem to issue from the word of God. *Tafsīr* thus was a legitimizing tool more than anything else. Nowhere else is this apparent than in al-Thaʿlabī's appropriation of Ṣūfī hermeneutics and Shīʿī pietistic sympathies with the *ahl al-bayt* (family of Muḥammad).

Al-Thaʿlabī informs us in his introduction that he was going to include the mystical level of interpretation in his commentary (Saleh 2004: 87). It is clear that he has read the work of al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) with the author himself and included a large portion of that work in his own commentary. Far more significant to the history of mystical *tafsīr* is that al-Thaʿlabī has quoted material from other mystics that seems to have been lost and only available in his work. A more definite assessment of this aspect of *al-Kashf* awaits a more thorough study of the mystical quotations and their relationship to al-Sulamī's work. All indications suggest that al-Thaʿlabī was the first to allow mystical interpretations into mainstream Sunnī *tafsīr*, thus anticipating the work of al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) as well as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111).

The circumference of al-Thaʿlabī's exegetical circle is thus unique in Islamic history; it almost encompassed every layer, from the earliest (the Ibn ʿAbbās traditions) to that of his own contemporaries, including the mystical level. Thus, at the very moment the philological approach was given primacy in Qurʾānic exegesis, the mystical approach was also admitted, creating in the Qurʾān a text that was both fully decipherable through the intellect and utterly beyond the realm of reason at the same time. The word of God was both manifestly clear (*mubīn*) and ineffable (*sirr*). As the text was being confined, it was also being set free.

Moreover, by admitting the mystical interpretation into his commentary, al-Thaʿlabī made the Qurʾān the most polyvalent text in Islamic culture: it was the only text decipherable both philologically and mystically. What is also significant about al-Thaʿlabī's polyvalent reading of the Qurʾān was his judicious refusal to accord any level of reading a preferential wink. The readings were piled atop one another and arranged (almost chronologically), and the reader was never advised to favor one over the other. Mystical interpretations were not only admitted into the commentary, a feat in itself, but they were treated equally. We have also to note the mode in which al-Thaʿlabī admitted mystical interpretations. There was no justification for their incorporation, no apologies, and no embarrassment; it is as if the mystical vision was part of the general culture and not the object of a *Kulturkampf* in early medieval Islam. His incorporation of this material is an audacious gesture and a testimony to his sagacity, for shortly after al-Thaʿlabī mysticism, as an intellectual current, would move from the periphery to the center.

What were the implications of the introduction of this new mode of interpretation into the mainstream exegetical tradition? The primary result of this infusion was to

transform the prosaic in the Qur'ān into the profound. By that I mean that the language of the Qur'ān, especially when philologically clear and syntactically transparent, would become prolific with meanings, meanings which were not possible or imaginable to extract through the usual methods available hitherto to Sunnī exegetes. As a rule al-Tha'labī would quote mystical interpretations most copiously when interpreting the prosaic verses where quotations and interpretations from the traditional camp were scarce due to the lack of obvious problems in the text. The result was a loquacious Qur'ān, a Qur'ān profuse in meaning at every level (Saleh 2004: 151–61).

One should not think, however, that al-Tha'labī was simply quoting the mystical interpretations available to him without filtering the material. The mystical interpretations available in *al-Kashf* are remarkably non-metaphysical. By that I mean they are less concerned with the question of the nature of God and more concerned with God's relationship to humanity. These remarks are the result of a preliminary survey of this material and it awaits a detailed study to compare it with al-Sulamī's Qur'ān commentary before it will be possible to supplement them.

As a paradigmatic example of al-Tha'labī's approach in *al-Kashf*, I will discuss here the interpretation of Q 53:10, "and He revealed to His servant that which He revealed" (*fa-awḥā ilā 'abdihi mā awḥā*). The verse presents several problems. First there is an ambiguous reference to something revealed, the pronoun *mā*; consequently one is apt to ask about what was revealed. Second, the identity of the servant is not given. Or at least if we do know – Muḥammad is the most obvious candidate, of course – an exegete might not be willing to consent to this identification. For if it is indeed Muḥammad who was the recipient of direct revelation, then why did God need Gabriel to do his work on other occasions according to the traditional theory of Qur'ānic revelation?

Which problem in Q 53:10 an exegete decides to tackle tells us more about his approach and concerns than about the verse itself. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, was more interested in solving the riddle of the ambiguous identity of the servant. Though he quoted authorities who thought it was Muḥammad who was the recipient of the revelation, he was unwilling to grant this interpretation any validity. Al-Ṭabarī did not want to jeopardize the neat theory of revelation that had become standard by his time. Al-Tha'labī, on the other hand, offered a far more systematic interpretation of the verse. First, he gave two possibilities for the identity of the servant: it could be Gabriel or Muḥammad. He did not editorialize, both are valid interpretations. Neither of the two possible meanings was given more weight. Moreover, al-Tha'labī was also interested in the reference of the pronoun *mā*. It could mean "that which God revealed" or the verse could mean, "He revealed to his servant that which God revealed to him." The significance of this tautology would become apparent later on. It could also be that what was revealed was a whole *sūra* of the Qur'ān, *sūra* 94.

Al-Tha'labī then introduced an interpretation that had not been adduced before. "It has been reported that God revealed to him (Muḥammad) that paradise is barred to prophets till you enter it, and it is barred to the non-Muslim nations till your nation enters it." What God has revealed to Muḥammad was thus not a Qur'ānic *sūra* or verse, which was always claimed to be the substance of Muḥammad's revelatory experience, but a salvific message that the Muḥammadan nation will be the first to be saved. The

ambiguity is now clear. The Qurʾān once more was always expressing one message, and when probed it can be revealed: Muslims are saved.

Yet there is more. Quoting al-Nūrī, an early Baghdadi mystic (d. 295/907), al-Thaʿlabī informed the reader that what was revealed to Muḥammad was a secret (*sirr*). Two lines of poetry are quoted that stated that secrets between lovers (presumably between Muḥammad and his God) are impossible to disclose. Here is a totally different approach to the problem of the ambiguity in the verse regarding the nature of the thing revealed to Muḥammad. The very wording of the verse was, according to the mystics, indicative of its meaning. There is simply no problem in Q 53:10. God did not specify what He revealed because it was a secret that should not be made known. Clearly, the mystics were eager to claim that Muḥammad received revelations that were above and beyond the Qurʾān, a sort of esoteric knowledge that resembled theirs.

Something, however, has been divulged. Al-Thaʿlabī has already revealed to the reader what God has told Muḥammad. The secret of the Qurʾān is that it proclaims one truth: God will save the Muslim nation. By calling that which has been already disclosed a secret, al-Thaʿlabī allows the reader to experience the revelatory moment anew as an intimate conversation with God. The disparate units of interpretation as offered by al-Thaʿlabī have a cumulative effect because of the way the material has been presented. First, we are told of what was revealed; then, we are told it is a secret. The reader is already privy to the mystery that he realizes could not be disclosed by either speech or writing. The salvific message of the Qurʾān is both ineffable and resounding.

Shīʿī Traditions in *Al-Kashf*

The publication of *al-Kashf* in 2002 by a Shīʿī scholar in Beirut represents the culmination of a rather fascinating story of the reception history of the work. Unraveling this complex history has proven to be the key to understanding major developments in both the history of medieval exegesis and Sunnī–Shīʿī polemical wars. It is not only that *al-Kashf* played a foundational role in establishing the high classical style of Qurʾānic interpretation, but it was a pivotal text in the war between Sunnism and Shīʿism. Without a proper understanding of the history of this text, no understanding is possible of these two issues.

Al-Thaʿlabī was active during a low point in the history of political Sunnism; both the Būyids and the Fāṭimids had shown the degree to which political Sunnism could retreat. One of the ways in which Sunnism could defang the appeal of Shīʿism was to adopt much of its pietistic language and sensibilities, most notably its love of the *ahl al-bayt*, the household of Muḥammad. If Sunnīs could show as much adoration and fervor in their love of Muḥammad’s family and descendants, then surely the Shīʿī propaganda about their suffering and usurped rights could be made less appealing. This was precisely what al-Thaʿlabī set out to do in the context of *tafsīr*. The Shīʿī interpretations of the Qurʾān that claimed that certain verses were references to ʿAlī, the cousin and son-in-law of Muḥammad, were adduced in his commentary. Citing such material was, however, never allowed to become the vehicle for any justification of Shīʿī ideology. Al-Thaʿlabī is vociferous in his attacks on the Shīʿites and their political claims. He did

not abandon Sunnism nor, for that matter, harbor pro-Shī'ī sympathies. There was no ambiguity in his commentary as to where he stood on this issue. His was a thoroughly Sunnī understanding of the early caliphal history. His pro-'Alī material was embedded in a highly intricate web of stratagems designed to rob such material of any ideological justification for Shī'ism. The aim was to make the love of Muḥammad's family as Sunnī as anything else without giving in to Shī'ī political ideology.

The introduction of Shī'ī material into the mainstream of the exegetical tradition by al-Tha'labī was thus not an act of subterfuge by which pro-Shī'ī sympathies were insinuated into the Sunnī worldview. It was certainly not an oversight, the result of a compulsive gathering of Shī'ī material that somehow was done inadvertently, as Ibn Taymiyya would later claim. Al-Tha'labī saw nothing Shī'ī in loving the family of Muḥammad and his descendants; the love of the *ahl al-bayt* constituted an act of *tazkiya*, a sort of purification and validation of one's faith. It was as Sunnī an act as any other. Thus, al-Tha'labī was, by incorporating Shī'ī material in his commentary, robbing it of any Shī'ī significance and making it part of the Sunnī world. The pro-Shī'ī material was declared in so far as it need not imply a hatred for the companions of Muḥammad or an implicit hierarchization of the merits of Muḥammad's successors, with his relatives on a rank higher than that of the first three caliphs. As long as a Sunnī theologian did not subscribe to the doctrine of the imamate, then no amount of love to *ahl al-bayt*, excessive as it might be, would turn him into a Shī'ī or decrease his Sunnism (Saleh 2004: 186–7).

The danger of such an approach should be apparent. Taken out of the complex web of arguments and presentation in which al-Tha'labī embedded these pro-Shī'ī interpretations, they could be easily used as proof by Shī'ī polemicists that their claims for 'Alī's supremacy were admitted to even by Sunnīs. Indeed Shī'ī polemicists found in *al-Kashf* a treasure trove of pro-Shī'ī material. Taken out of its context, it was an unbeatable argument against the Sunnīs. Indeed, the prestige of al-Tha'labī's work meant that the work was one of the Shī'ī polemicists' most precious finds. Soon, the situation called for a drastic answer, and Sunnism, in the person of Ibn Taymiyya, would rise to the occasion (Saleh 2004: 215–21). Ibn Taymiyya in his *Muqaddima fī usūl al-tafsīr* ("Introduction to the Foundations of Exegesis"; see Saleh 2004: 216–19), as well as in his *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya* ("The Path of Sunnism"; see Saleh 2004: 218–21), mounted a concerted effort to undermine the reputation of al-Tha'labī. To the degree that Ibn Taymiyya's assessment was eventually to prevail, it was successful. The aim of his attacks was to downgrade the significance of al-Tha'labī as a mainstream, trustworthy, Sunnī scholar. As such he was not part of orthodoxy, and the relevance of using him in arguments by the Shī'ī polemicists was weakened.

Al-Tha'labī and Medieval Qur'ānic Exegesis

The current that al-Tha'labī developed, what I have termed the encyclopedic exegetical tradition, would become the prevalent form of interpretation in the medieval period. Many were the challenges posed to this approach, yet its dominance and continuity

endured. This has more to do with *tafsīr*'s malleability and the exegetes' own understanding of its main function: defending and defining Sunnism. Al-Tha'labī's enlargement of the encyclopedic approach was an attempt to resolve the cultural struggle that raged within Islamic societies all over the Muslim world during the period between the fourth and sixth century of the *hijra*. The object of this struggle was the soul of the educated man in the Arabo-Islamic synthesis. The rise of *adab* (belles lettres) and *adab* encyclopedic compilations – as the embodiment of what a learned individual was to know and cherish – was a threat to the wish of the religious-minded to make the Qur'ān the center of the learning experience. But not only was *adab* making strides in this battle, so, too, was mysticism or Ṣūfism, with its claim both to understand the human condition and to proffer remedies for it. If these two strands, which were at the center of the Sunnī community, were not enough, we have to keep in mind the great danger that the Shī'ī camp posed to the Sunnī-minded communities. Shī'ism, that is, intellectual Shī'ism, was also making advances over the breadth of the Islamic world and undermining everywhere the intellectual foundations of Sunnī orientations (we need only remember the biography of Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) and the works of al-Ghazālī). It is al-Tha'labī, I argue, whom we should credit with rising to the challenge of *adab*, Ṣūfism, and Shī'ism, to reassert the centrality of a Sunnī-interpreted Qur'ān in the lives of the educated.

Al-Tha'labī was also a member of a school of interpretation that I have called the Nīshāpūrī school of *tafsīr*. His student, al-Wāḥidī, wrote three Qur'ān commentaries, the most important of which, *al-Basīṭ*, is still unedited and unpublished. To describe *al-Basīṭ* as revolutionary is not an exaggeration. Another author who was also heavily influenced by al-Tha'labī was al-Ṭībī (d. 743/1343). Nothing can be said of his work since no scholar has even investigated it. Thus, even a monographic study of an author like al-Tha'labī remains incomplete for we are unable to measure the full degree of his work's influence till we have the whole spectrum of the tradition accessible to us.

To explain the voluminous medieval *tafsīr* tradition as the result of a compulsive habit of medieval copying, as some modern scholars have opined, is to overlook the intellectual foundations and concerns of one of the most formidable of religious sciences of medieval Islam. While modernity has unseated most of the other medieval disciplines, *tafsīr* remains central as a discipline in fashioning an Islamic outlook even to this day. It is unfortunate that the history of the medieval exegetical tradition is the least studied of Islamic disciplines. The neglect is compounded by the fact that both Western scholars and Arab intellectuals saw little value in studying this medieval production. Arab nationalism and the intellectual movement it generated were interested in the Arabic belles lettres medieval tradition and saw little value in devoting any effort to issuing critical editions of compilations on the meaning of the Qur'ān; the result is that no major Qur'ān commentary was edited by the giants of Arab scholarship; Western scholars meanwhile were concerned with the early history of the exegetical tradition, and had only perfunctory concern for the later periods. The result is that we lack access to the complete spectrum of this tradition. Recently, however, the situation is improving, since there seems to be a concerted effort to publish this literature (due to the rise of Islamism in the Arab world and to the retreat of Arabism as the intellectual paradigm). What is needed is a change from the diachronic study of *tafsīr* to a more systematic

synchronic study of *tafsīr* works in the form of monographic studies on individual scholars or works. We are still at the very early stages of outlining the history of this genre and major intellectual figures who were primarily exegetes, like al-Wahīdī, al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), al-Rāzī, al-Ṭībī, al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685–716/1282–1316), and many others, have hardly received the attention they deserve.

Note

- 1 Since research into medieval exegetical tradition is still in its infancy, assessments such as the one I am going to suggest in this subsection are unavoidably provisional. Although investigation of the exegetical works of Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) and Ibn Mardawayh (d. 401/1010) may lead me to reverse this conclusion, I am presuming that the welding together of the non-interpretive prophetic mainstream *ḥadīth* with Qur'ānic exegesis was the work of al-Tha'labī. When I first published my monograph on al-Tha'labī, however, I was not fully aware that these two figures have to be investigated more thoroughly before one may come to the conclusions I have advanced (Saleh 2004: 226). This is much more easily said than done: Ibn Mardawayh's work is lost, and there seems to be some confusion as to how much of the commentary of Ibn Abī Ḥātim has survived. At present, I see no reason to change my conclusions, but I feel uncertain enough that I ought to voice my doubts to the reader. If anything, this caveat should summon specialists to turn their attention to these two figures in order to disentangle the history of *tafsīr*. Since the magisterial work of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *al-Durr al-Manthūr*, is the repository of material from the above-mentioned authors, a study of this work is urgently needed in order to clarify the situation further, and a study of it may be the only way out of the impasse created by our inadequate grasp of the tradition.

Further reading

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- Al-Tha'labī, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad (2002) *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān al-ma'rūf bi-Tafṣīr al-Tha'labī*. Ed. Abī Muḥammad b. 'Ashūr. Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, Beirut.

CHAPTER 26

Stories of the Prophets

Marianna Klar

Introduction to the Text

The late tenth-/early eleventh-century figure Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035) was the author of five major works: a commentary on the Qurʾān (Saleh 2004), a biographical dictionary of people who died upon hearing the Qurʾān (Wiesmüller 2002), two lost books entitled *Rabīʿ al-mudhakkirīn* (“Springtime of the Admonishers”) and *al-Kāmil fī ʿilm al-Qurʾān* (“The Complete Work regarding the Qurʾānic Sciences,” see Saleh 2004: 51–2), and the pivotal and much imitated collection of tales of the prophets, the *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (“Brides at (their) Weddings, Regarding the Tales of the Prophets”; Brinner 2002; Klar 2006; Nagel 1967). This latter work was written subsequent to his commentary on the Qurʾān (the *Commentary* is cited within the *Tales*) and presents a chronologically arranged description of historical events from the time of the creation of the world to the “Year of the Elephant” in 570 CE, giving the biographies of some forty-six individuals or, occasionally, peoples.¹ Many of these are routinely described as Islamic prophets – thus Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Jesus, and so forth are included in the volume; others, for instance the “fallen angels” Hārūt and Mārūt, kings such as Saul and Alexander the Great, the peoples of Iram and al-Rass, are not prophets *per se* but rather historical personages or communities significant for their place in the Qurʾān or for the role they are reported to have played in religious history.

Other monographs dealing with pre-Islamic history did already exist at the time of al-Thaʿlabī; it was, however, more usual to find such material within larger-scale universal histories, commentaries on the Qurʾān, or collections of *ḥadīth*, and the vast

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majority of our extant works of tales of the prophets post-date al-Thaʿlabī, with many of them, for example Nāṣir al-Dīn b. Burhān al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī (d. 710/1310) and Muḥammad b. Bisṭām al-Khūshābī Wānī Efendī (d. 1096/1658), openly taking al-Thaʿlabī as their model. The author alludes to his possible motivation in compiling such a volume in his introduction to the collection; among the reasons he cites for God having told stories of past peoples to Muḥammad, al-Thaʿlabī (1985: 2–3) states that:

[God] told [Muḥammad] the stories to serve as an example of the noble traits exhibited by the messengers and prophets of old...and so that his community would refrain from those actions for which [previous] prophets' communities had been punished....He told him the stories to confirm his [position] and prove his glory and the glory of his community....God told him these stories as an education and an instruction for his community, that is to say He mentioned the prophets and their rewards, and the enemies [of God] and their punishment, then in other passages He warned the [community] against the deeds of [God's] enemies, and urged them towards the deeds of [God's] friends. God said, "In Joseph and his brethren are signs for those who ask questions" (Q 12:7) and "In their stories is a warning for those of understanding" (Q 12:111) and "A guide and a warning to the god-fearing" (Q 5:46) and other such verses. Shibī said, "The common people are kept occupied [listening to] the narration of a tale, while the élite are busy learning its lesson." He told him the stories of the prophets and past friends [of God] in order to keep their memory and the memory of their deeds alive....Ibn Durayd recited [the following epithet] to me, "A person leaves only a tale behind him, so strive that your tale be remembered as a beautiful one."

The work as such is presented as an exemplum, a warning, an education, an instruction, and an encouragement for its readers; al-Thaʿlabī would also appear to have believed firmly in the importance and validity of narrative. The fact of his being an established Qurʾān commentator at the time at which he compiled the collection will have given al-Thaʿlabī ample authority to attempt a work of this type. These elements are important in pointing the way one should best approach the text.

Publication History

The earliest extant manuscript of the work would appear to be in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and has been dated to the end of the eleventh century, though this manuscript is missing its final pages; the British Library has a complete but slightly later manuscript, dated 512/1119. There are a further forty extant manuscripts catalogued in Brockelmann (*GAL* I, 429; *SI*, 592). Brockelmann also informs us that the *Tales* in its entirety was first published in Cairo in 1282/1865, then again, by the Būlāq Press, in 1286/1869; it was printed a further ten times in Cairo between 1292/1875 and 1345/1926, once in Kashmir (1288/1871), and twice in Bombay (1295/1878 and 1306/1888); a Turkish translation appeared in the same year as the first Arabic edition, with a Tatar translation following in 1320/1903; the Joseph story was published in Cairo as an independent monograph in 1279/1862, and the Samson story in 1299/1881. The Princeton catalogue yields six different editions: the early

Būlāq edition, printed by al-Maṭba‘a al-Miṣriyya in 1286/1869; a 1297/1880 edition published in al-Azhar by al-Sharafiyya press; two further Egyptian editions, with the *Rawḍ al-rayāḥīn fī ḥikāyat al-ṣāliḥīn* of ‘Allāma al-Yāfi‘ī in the margins, one printed by Maṭba‘at al-‘Ulūm al-Adabiyya in 1344/1925 and the other by Maktabat al-Jumhuriyya al-‘Arabiyya in the 1950s; and another Egyptian edition, dated 1954 and published by Muṣṭafā ‘l-Bābī ‘l-Ḥalabī. The remaining edition is a Beirut imprint published by al-Maktaba al-Thaqafiyya in the 1970s.

It is worth pointing out that a superficial comparison of four widely available editions of the *Tales* shows little variation in the substance of the text; the printed editions moreover show surprisingly little variation of any significance when compared with the 1119 CE British Library manuscript (Supplementary Or. 1494). For instance, in the manuscript version of the Noah story, Noah is asked, “When you disembarked, how did you find your life (*umraka*)?” In all four versions of the printed edition consulted for this chapter this becomes, “When you disembarked, how did you find the world (*al-dunyā*)?”² In the Job story, where the manuscript tells us only that God forgives Job, the printed editions all inform us that God forgives Job “for what he said.” In the Saul story, where the manuscript states that the king’s intentions towards David improved (*ḥassan niyyātahu fīhi*), the printed editions tell us the king “felt more kindly towards him” (*aḥsan thanā’uhu alayhi*; one edition moreover gives *thanā’* in place of *thanā’ahu*). A random comparison yields only this level of minor textual discrepancy between editions.

However, this does not, of course, mean that the text is straightforward or lacking in textual ambiguities. A critical edition is sorely needed, not least to go some way towards setting the work in its contextual background. The dangers of a non-contextualized reading of the text are apparent in Brinner’s for the most part accurate translation of the *Tales*. There he renders the events that led to the loss of Solomon’s throne (Brinner 2002: 542) as “Solomon became infatuated (*uftutina*),” presumably on the assumption that the context for this anecdote is romantic: the correct context for the passage would, however, seem to be provided in al-Tha‘labī’s Qur’ān commentary, where we are told that, prior to the same events described in the *Tales*, Solomon was “tested (*uftutina*) through taking the statue into his home.” An understanding of “infatuated” clearly does not work in this expanded context; the existence of an informed critical edition would be invaluable in limiting such misreadings of the text. As Jacob Lassner (1993: 64 ff.) comments, “Arabic texts of the period can be extremely allusive,” and this is particularly true in the relatively under-explored field of *Tales of the Prophets*. As such, care should be taken in reading the text.

Major Sources

The Qur’ān provides the framework for the tales of each figure, but hundreds of additional authorities are cited by name within the text. From these we can deduce that the major sources for the *Tales* included the Ibn ‘Abbās-based commentaries of Sa‘īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714), Mujāhid (d. 100–4/718–22), al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105–6/723–4), ‘Ikrima (d. 105/723–4), al-Suddī (d. 127/745), al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), and Muqātil b. Sulaymān

(d. 150/767). Ibn ‘Abbās himself (d. ca. 68/687) is often cited as an authority, as are other companions of Muḥammad, notably Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678), Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652–3), and ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar (d. 73/693). Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), whose biography of Muḥammad included a section on the pre-Islamic prophets, is another frequent source for material, as are the commentaries of the famous sermonizer and preacher Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and his pupil Qatāda (d. 117/734 or 118/735). Another major source is the ubiquitous Ka‘b al-Aḥbār (d. 32/651), although the equally prolific Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 114/732) is rarely cited (on all of these people see Khoury 1978; Nagel 1967).

Al-Tha‘labī also cites his fellow commentator and historian, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), and Raif Khoury (1978: 174) suggests that ‘Umāra b. Wathīma was another source for al-Tha‘labī’s *Tales*, although, due perhaps to his habit of not giving full chains of transmission for his material (in the introduction to the *Commentary*, al-Tha‘labī comments that this is a deliberate space-saving strategy; Saleh 2004: 70), ‘Umāra is never mentioned by name in the text. The interdependence of this type of literature is, however, clear from the fact that al-Tha‘labī is in turn cited in the later historiographical works of Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), as well as in later commentaries and other works. Johns (1989: 225–66; cf. Saleh 2004: 127–9, 209–14, and *passim* with reference to the *Commentary*), for instance, posits a relationship between al-Tha‘labī’s *Tales* and the Qur’ān commentary of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), stating that, with reference to the exegesis of Q 38: 21–5, the later author “at times indeed seems to be following Tha‘labī’s presentation of the David story verbatim” (Johns 1989: 237), and “It is clear how closely Zamakhsharī has followed Tha‘labī, accepting and quoting the same mosaic of authorities, but weighting them differently” (Johns 1989: 240).

On a final note, much has been made of the supposedly Jewish or Christian origins of the bulk of this material. That there was no stigma attached to the consultation of extra-Islamic sources in this early period seems evident from *ḥadīth* reports. It is, however, generally concluded that the bulk of these sources were oral in nature and impossible to identify retrospectively; al-Tha‘labī may well cite the amorphous “People of the Book” but he names no specific Jewish or Christian sources. As such, the extant Jewish and Christian material is not as useful as the Islamic sources in providing a contextual basis to aid our understanding of ambiguous passages. The situation is rendered particularly complex by the difficulty in accurately dating tales. The lack of manuscript versions of a tale prior to a specific date by no means rules out the possibility of that tale having nonetheless been in common circulation. It is hence almost impossible to state with any confidence whether a certain explanation of events common to both traditions entered the Islamic repertoire from that of the People of the Book and should be read in the context of that tradition, or vice versa (see Wheeler 2002: 17–19, 23–6, 39–40). As Peter Awn (1983: 9) points out, the medieval relationship between traditions was less than straightforward:

The *qīṣaṣ* literature should not be viewed as wholly derivative from Jewish and Christian sources, for it underwent substantial Islamisation at the hands of Muslim preachers and

commentators. Cross-fertilization occurred, with details, nuances and embellishments traded back and forth among the various religious communities. Finally, the influence of these tales on indigenous non-Christian or Jewish pre-Islamic beliefs should not be discounted.

Construction of the Text

The *Tales of the Prophets* provides its reader with a history of the world from creation to the year of Muḥammad's birth. It opens with several chapters on the creation, divided into earth, heavens etc., closes with a description of two battles that took place shortly before the time of Muḥammad, and in between gives a chronologically arranged series of biographies; it includes the tales of all the pre-Islamic historical figures mentioned, alluded to, or suggested by the text of the Qur'ān. The vast majority of the forty-six biographies given are introduced through a Qur'ānic passage; thus Qur'ānic verses provide the framework for almost all of the tales.

Minor figures within the volume are presented over a few pages or in a single chapter, while the biographies of major figures can run to over one hundred pages and are divided into various sub-chapters and headings. Thus, for example, the tale of Abraham opens with a section on the prophet's birth. This is followed by a sub-chapter on his emergence from an underground hiding place and subsequent return to his people, a section on the births of Ishmael and Isaac, Ishmael's and Hagar's departure from the *ḥaram* in Mecca, and the tale of the well of Zamzam, a further section on the story of Zamzam, a fifth section on the history of the Ka'ba to the (then) present day, a sub-chapter on God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son, followed by the tale of the sacrifice itself, then a section on the destruction of Nimrod and the building of the tower of Babel, an eighth sub-chapter concerning the deaths of Sarah, Hagar, and others of Abraham's wives and their children, then a section on Abraham's death, and a concluding section listing the prophet's special characteristics.

The substantially longer Moses chapter, meanwhile, opens with a discussion of the prophet's genealogy. The second sub-chapter deals with his birth, and the next with a physical description of Moses and of Aaron. These are followed by a section on Moses' killing of the Egyptian and his subsequent move to Midian, a sub-chapter dealing with his arrival at Midian and marriage to Shu'ayb's daughter, leading into two sections concerning Moses' staff. The eighth section then describes Moses' departure from Midian and how he and his brother came to confront Pharaoh, and the ninth the arrival before Pharaoh. Next follows a sub-chapter regarding the tale of Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, and the magicians, a section on the believer who spoke out against Pharaoh, and his family, a section on Pharaoh's wife and her death, and a sub-chapter describing how the tower was built. After sections detailing God's signs to Pharaoh, rationalizing these signs, and specifically dealing with the locusts, the narrative moves on to Moses' night flight and the parting of the sea.

The sixteenth sub-chapter of the Moses chapter then describes the prophet's encounter with God on the mountain, the tablets, and the revelation of the Torah. The

“ten commandments” are discussed, followed by the matter of the worship of the golden calf and a sub-chapter on the identity of Korah and his rebellion. The Moses narrative continues with three sections describing Khidr, and Moses’ encounter with him; a sub-chapter on the cow the people are ordered to sacrifice; and the story of the building of the temple, the ark of the covenant, the Shechina, and the sacrifice consumed by fire. A section on the journey of the Israelites to Syria is followed by the tale of Balaam, then a sub-chapter on the chiefs Moses chose to rule his people while they were away. The final five sections deal with the giant Og, God’s favors to the people of Israel in the wilderness, the conquest of Jericho, and the deaths first of Aaron then of Moses.

Throughout the volume, the information in each section of al-Tha’labī’s narrative is presented in the form of a series of individual reports. Most of these are simply ascribed to single figures, but a significant number are given fuller chains of authority. Others are ascribed to anonymous groups such as the “people of knowledge” or the “people of the book,” and yet others are unasccribed. These individual reports each present a facet of the topic under discussion, and it is through the accumulation of these various facets that al-Tha’labī constructs his narrative. The narrative therefore does not progress in a straightforward linear fashion, but rather would appear to meander its way through its presentation of historical events.

Thus if we look at the horses episode in the Solomon story, in which the prophet either slaughters or strokes his horses after they either cause him to forget to pray or remind him of God (Q 38:30–3), al-Tha’labī opens his description of events with an anonymous statement to the effect that God gave Arab horses exclusively to Solomon, followed by various possible descriptions of the horses referred to in Q 38:32 – one on the authority of Ḥasan, another on the authority of al-Kalbī, and a third on the authority of Muqātil. Al-Tha’labī then resumes the anonymous narrative voice to explain the events that caused the prophet to miss the prayer time and slaughter his horses in consequence, and follows this with Ka’b’s explanation of how many horses there were and how they were killed, coupled with the fact that God deprived the prophet of his throne for fourteen days as a result of this slaughter. This serves to move the narrative on, and the forward action is maintained in the next statement, on the authority of Ḥasan, that God in fact rewarded the prophet for his actions with command of the wind, which leads to a description of this obedient wind. The narrative then continues with the theme of the wind, and gives a lengthy anonymous report of one of the journeys Solomon took courtesy of this wind, and what he did in his hometown prior to departing on this journey. Al-Tha’labī cites an anonymous couplet inspired by this, which leads the narrative into a lengthy poem on the obedient wind, and other topics, supposedly found engraved on a rock and written by a friend of Solomon’s.

The narrative then returns to the main story, and gives an anonymous report to the effect that Solomon did not slaughter the horses but rather branded their legs “with the brand of charity,” followed by al-Zuhri’s account that Solomon wiped the dust from their legs and necks. An alternative version is then proposed, via the explanation given by ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, in which God orders the angels to return the sun so that Solomon can perform his missed prayer. This leads the narrative on into another new phase: an account in which God’s creation of the horse is described, statements from God and

from Muḥammad about the nature and function of the horse, the angel's reaction to the creation of the horse, what the horse said when it arrived on earth, and Adam's choice of the horse among all of God's creatures.

There ends al-Tha'labī's description of the horses episode in the story of Solomon. Out of two full pages of narrative, there are eighteen lines directly related to the subject: thirteen stating that the horses were slaughtered, five giving other explanations. Of the thirteen lines, only one suggests that the prophet was censured for his actions, while a sum total of twenty lines are devoted to the subject of the wind the prophet was supposedly given as a reward for his actions. Sixteen lines are devoted to praise of the horse.

Thus, on the basis of narrative volume alone, the reader could assume that the "correct" reading is as follows: the horses, which were a remarkable and precious possession, were slaughtered, and God rewarded the prophet for his actions. However, it is important to stress that at no point is the reader told what he or she should think about the episode. Moreover, the nature of al-Tha'labī's text is such that the reader must make his or her decision about an episode based not only on the information given that directly relates to that episode, but on the strength of the chapter in its entirety. Indeed, the whole book acts as a cohesive unit. A series of complex themes runs across the tales, and it is important to view each chapter in light of those that went before. Although the text moves through the biographies of forty-six very different figures, these figures share the same basic human concerns (Klar 2006). Moreover, there are constant characters across the narrative; God, of course, and the Devil, but also prophets who continue to reappear throughout the *Tales* via the devices, both narrative and concrete, that are not confined by their actual birth and death. Thus, for instance, Adam, whose coffin is used to divide the sexes on board the Ark, who brings Moses' staff down with him when he falls from the garden, who names Joseph and is the cause of his amazing beauty, who gives sixty of his own years to prolong the future life of David, who is used, as we have seen, to add legitimacy to the horses in the story of Solomon, and so on.³

A further cohesive element is drawn by the constant, almost tangible presence of the voices of the prophet Muḥammad, his nephew 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the second caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and, of course, the Qur'ān, which all serve to remind the reader of where this apparently meandering narrative is leading. Thus while pre-Islamic figures move forwards through history, post-Islamic figures move backwards, and the end result is a narrative that is tightly woven together. Of course, the text can be utilized as a reference work to access the major opinions on a specific incident, but it is at its richest as a manual which, by wise and varied example, teaches its reader about the nuances of the human condition and the range of human experience. A similar impression of the text is apparent in Nagel's (1967: 96 – my translation) pronouncement that "Tha'labī's stories of the prophets are not simply history or tales as, for instance, in Ibn Qutayba's *Book of Knowledge* or Ṭabarī's *Annals*: they address themselves to the listener or the reader and require him or her to accept and to follow the insights and behaviors portrayed therein." Much like the rabbis of late antiquity, the Islamic story-tellers and historiographers were engaged in an ongoing exploration of the meaning of the stories they inherited, attempting to present these stories to their readers in a convincing and communicative way, and in many ways al-Tha'labī's *Tales of the Prophets* is a unique expression of the

desires and concerns of the ordinary medieval Muslim. The linking together of figures from the distant past, early Islamic figures, and a contemporary voice, serves to emphasize the relevance and applicability of the events described.

Social and Intellectual Context

A native of Nīshāpūr, a then bustling intellectual center several weeks' journey from the seat of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate in Baghdad, al-Tha'labī reflects contemporary concerns and sensibilities in his work, which is in many ways a reflection both of his person and of his times. The rising popularity of mystical thought can for instance be evidenced in his citation of Shiblī (d. 334/945) and al-Junayd (d. 298/910), and in the frequent presence of ascetic themes within the tales.⁴ The thorny issue of free will versus pre-determination, at its height in the second half of the second/eighth century with the rise of the Mu'tazila, is meanwhile expressed, for instance, in the story of the phoenix which tried to cheat destiny and was duly humiliated. The question of rationalism, also brought to the forefront by the Mu'tazilī movement and much disputed over the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, can be seen to be expressed through al-Tha'labī's ongoing concern with reason (*aql*), for example in the story of the Queen of Sheba where Solomon sets tests to gauge the Queen's sense of reason. The infamous Qarmaṭīs of the same period are mentioned in al-Tha'labī's description of the history of the Ka'ba, and the fact that it was a Nīshāpūrī, described by al-Tha'labī as "our leader," who restored the black stone from the Ka'ba in Mecca after the failed Qarmaṭī attempt to remove it, can be taken both as evidence of the strong regional identities of the period and as an allusion to the growth of Persian nationalism. Indeed the presence of an isolated passage of Persian left untranslated in the otherwise Arabic text of the *Tales* (al-Tha'labī 1985: 208) can be read as something of a nod to the resurgence of Persian as a literary and scholarly language. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) certainly highlights the Persian aspect of al-Tha'labī when he mentions him (Swartz 1986: 182), making it clear that his national identity was part of how al-Tha'labī was later perceived.

This notwithstanding, it should be borne in mind that many of these more general features are also true of earlier works of tales of the prophets, and indeed of the genre as a whole. Moreover, at no point does al-Tha'labī engage with any of these theories on a sophisticated level; theological and political debate was not his purpose in compiling his text, and by concentrating on "evidence" within al-Tha'labī's text of the doctrinal, political, and historical issues of the times, one runs the risk of restricting medieval intellectual society, and al-Tha'labī's understanding of it, to a series of simple concepts. Although al-Tha'labī was a product of his time, his work was also a product of its genre; another element is added by the fact that al-Tha'labī remained throughout an individual, with his own interests and specific academic agenda: all of these factors should be considered in one's approach to the text. Furthermore, the *Tales of the Prophets* consists for the most part of citations from referenced sources rather than the author's own words. Even if adherence to a certain theological doctrine can be perceived to be implied

in a report, there still remains to be decided the extent to which al-Thaʿlabī can be held to have shared such views. The situation, as such, is highly complex.

Where a relationship between al-Thaʿlabī and his medieval environment can, however, be more straightforwardly attributed is in the author's choice of sources and his methods. Later commentators who also produced a volume of pre-Islamic history tended, significantly, to utilize different criteria in selecting the sources they deemed reliable and the stories they judged to be worthy of repetition, famously rejecting many of the first generation of exegetes and traditionists as unreliable. Al-Thaʿlabī's concern was evidently not for textual criticism (though this is not to suggest that he knowingly repeated tales he suspected of being inauthentic) but for comprehensiveness (he tends to quote more variants of each episode than any other author within this genre) and narrative cohesion, as is made abundantly clear in the introduction to his *Tales*. While other collectors of tales of the prophets continued, and indeed still continue, to utilize such a methodology beyond the early medieval period, the highly traditional Sunnī scholars came to alter their perception of the function and purpose of such material. Al-Thaʿlabī, rather like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) a century later, was inclusive of certain aspects of some potentially unorthodox elements of society; in al-Thaʿlabī's case these were the Ṣūfīs, the Shīʿīs, and the popular story-tellers, whose customs and materials he utilized to enhance the readability and impact of his own work. As will become clear below, this decision was later to have a significant impact on his scholarly reputation, and it is in its innovative use of genre and materials that the work shows us why al-Thaʿlabī is a significant figure for this formative period of Islamic intellectual history.

Reception of the Text

Although we have no evidence of any contemporary criticisms of al-Thaʿlabī (indeed, the wide citation and dissemination of his major works implies rather that these were extremely favorably received), at a later date al-Thaʿlabī was to come under attack on several fronts. Ibn al-Jawzī mentions him as follows (Swartz 1986: 182 [Arabic 103]): “A number of Persians (*aʿajim*) have written books of a homiletic nature which they filled with incredible stories and corrupt ideas. Much of this can be found among *tafsīr* works of which Abū Ishāq ath-Thaʿlabī has preserved an example.”

He then goes on to single out four specific examples of the kind of material he has in mind: stories about Dhū ʿl-Kifl which evidently conflate this character with a wicked Israelite known as Kifl; reports to the effect that David wished for the death of Uriah and subsequently married his widow; the claim that Joseph loosened his belt during his encounter with Potiphar's wife; and the suggestion that Muḥammad uttered the so-called Satanic verses (with reference to Q 53:19–20).

That there was an on-going friction between the story-tellers and the authorities on this issue is evident from the writings of al-Ghazālī a century earlier:

People should guard against lies and against such stories which point to trivial faults and compromises which the common folk fail to understand, or to realize that they are nothing

but trivial and unusual faults although they have been followed by atoning deeds and rectified by good works which are supposed to make up for them. (Faris 1966: 89)

Nonetheless, such material did continue to appear in later works and, as such, Ibn al-Jawzī's criticism of al-Tha'labī should by no means be seen as indicative of a mood of universal censure. To suggest that such anecdotes intended, or indeed were read, by those who repeated them, to imply any disrespect to the prophets in question is incorrect. Consequently, although some may have been alarmed by what they saw as the potential for misunderstandings in these stories, the tales continued to circulate in popular, scholarly, and even the most orthodox circles.

Al-Tha'labī was to come under criticism again under the pen of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 729/1328), who dedicates a lengthy passage in his *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya* ("The Path of Prophetic Conduct") to a refutation of aspects of al-Tha'labī's material and, *inter alia*, to a general critique of al-Tha'labī's use of *ḥadīth* (Ibn Taymiyya n.d.: IV, 2–80). Although this is with specific reference to al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary, aspects of Ibn Taymiyya's criticism can also be perceived to have relevance for the reputation of the *Tales*; he describes al-Tha'labī as possessing virtue and faith, but being, in the likeness of "someone who attempts to gather firewood by night," unable to discern good *ḥadīth* from bad, or prophetic *sunna* from heretical innovation (*bidā'*) (Ibn Taymiyya n.d.: IV, 4).

Yet it is surely extremely significant that, despite these attacks on al-Tha'labī, Ibn Taymiyya's pupil, Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), who is credited with carrying out his master's radical methodology in the production of his own works, cites al-Tha'labī repeatedly in his own history of the pre-Islamic prophets. He omits passages whose content he disputes (often albeit referring the reader instead to his Qur'ān commentary where details are provided; for the issue of *isrā'īliyyāt* see, e.g., Calder 1993; McAuliffe 1998; Tottoli 1999), and qualifies the authenticity of some *ḥadīth* taken from our author where he deems this appropriate, but al-Tha'labī clearly remains, for him, a substantial source. Moreover, in his entry for al-Tha'labī in the biographical section of his work, Ibn Kathīr (1985: XII, 43) describes al-Tha'labī as follows: "He knew many *ḥadīth* and had many teachers, and many marvelous things are found in his books on account of this." Ibn Kathīr would therefore appear to downplay his master's criticism of al-Tha'labī via his biographical entry, implying that it is merely on account of the quantity of *ḥadīth* he knows and the breadth of his learning that there are so many strange and wondrous things in his works. This can be read as a qualification of previous words of censure against our author, and indeed as something of an attempt to salvage his reputation; alternately it can be viewed, as can Ibn Taymiyya's admission of al-Tha'labī's religiosity and good character, as a way of criticizing the text without criticizing the man.

As for the reception of the *Tales per se*, this is difficult to gauge, as the volume is not often described in classical sources. The fifteenth-century chronographer al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) quotes it at length, and places the *Tales* alongside the biographies of Muḥammad by Ibn Ishāq and al-Bukhārī, the story collections of Ibn al-Furāt (d. 807/1405) and al-Kisā'ī (fl. eleventh century), and the world histories of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn 'Asākir, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Mālikī, under the category "stories of the prophets" (al-Sakhāwī n.d.: 518), but although al-Tha'labī is listed in all the other appropriate

biographical dictionaries and the *Tales* is usually mentioned by name, it is the Qurʾān commentary that has traditionally been the focus of scholarly attention. Similarly, we have very little documentary evidence of how collections such as al-Thaʿlabī’s were used in medieval society. Nonetheless, the number of extant, catalogued manuscripts of the *Tales*, and the wide dissemination of printed editions of the work, belie any attempt to diminish its importance or popularity. From the introduction to the *Tales* we can deduce that al-Thaʿlabī believed in the importance and validity of narrative as an instructional tool. That al-Thaʿlabī also held the conviction that a work should be disparate in its sources and arranged in a reader-friendly fashion is clear from the introduction to his *Commentary*. Both of these stated methodologies place the reader firmly in pole position, and could explain why the wider success of the work may have been commercial rather than scholarly; the work’s commercial success also shows itself in the number of imitative volumes that later appeared, especially in the Turkish and Persian-speaking Islamic lands.

Notes

- 1 This figure does not take into account personages whose biographies are provided within the tales of others, e.g., the story of Khidr, which is contained within the tale of Moses.
- 2 The printed versions consulted include: al-Thaʿlabī (1985); the Azhar edition, al-Maktaba al-Saʿdiyya, Cairo, n.d.; edition by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Sayyid al-Ahl, Singapore, 1962; and the edition of al-Maktaba al-Thaqafiyya, Beirut, n.d.
- 3 Thackston (1978: xxiii–xxiv) describes a similar phenomenon as occurring in al-Kisāʿī’s *Tales of the Prophets*: “In Kisa’i’s version...a sense of continuity is maintained by reintroducing ‘props’ throughout the tales. Adam’s *tābūt*, for example...emerges at significant points in the narrative: it holds the leaves of Adam’s Book and is passed down through Seth and successive generations to Noah; it contains carpentry tools used by Noah to construct his ark; it is also the Ark of the Covenant carried about by the Children of Israel. All of the articles of clothing with which Jacob invests Joseph were inherited from the former prophets. Moses’ staff, which he takes from Shuʿayb/Jethro, had been brought to Adam from Paradise and passed down to Seth, Idris, Noah, Salih, and Abraham. In the Job narrative, Iblis stands on the very rock Cain used to kill Abel. The ram that miraculously appears to be sacrificed in Isaac’s stead turns out to be the very ram that Abel offered to God. And the stones which David picks up on his way to do battle with Goliath cry out that they had belonged to his fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”
- 4 For al-Thaʿlabī’s alleged Ṣūfī connections see Nagel (1967: 82). Saleh (2004: 56–65) disputes the extent to which al-Thaʿlabī can be named a Ṣūfī, yet makes it clear that he was nonetheless extremely interested in the ideas of the mystics. It is moreover evident that asceticism as a whole was a general feature of literature of this type (see Khoury 1978: 44–5, 96–7).

Further reading

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CHAPTER 27

Ṣūfism

Alan Godlas

Ṣūfī Qur'ān exegesis, *al-tafsīr al-ṣūfī*, *al-tafsīr al-ishārī* or *bi'l-ishāra* (Qur'ān exegesis through allusion), is a little-studied, controversial, and voluminous genre of Qur'ān commentary, the key feature of which is an “unveiling” (*kashf*) to the individual Ṣūfī commentator, an unveiling of a relationship between a Qur'ānic verse and Ṣūfī concepts. Although the only comprehensive scholarly treatment of this genre is Süleyman Ateş' work in Turkish, *İşārī tefsīr okulu* (“The School of Allusive Commentary”) (Ateş 1974), Paul Nwyia (1970) investigated the primacy of the individual experience of the commentator in Ṣūfī hermeneutics as well as the development of a Ṣūfī vocabulary for expressing this. Kristin Z. Sands (2005) completed a study in which she comparatively examined exoteric and Ṣūfī Qur'ān commentary. Because Ṣūfī commentators frequently move beyond the apparent (*ẓāhir*) point of the verses on which they are commenting and instead relate Qur'ānic verses to the inner or esoteric (*bāṭin*) and metaphysical dimensions of consciousness and existence, they have often been criticized (al-Dhahabī 1961: II, 337–78; al-Mashannī 1986: 639–50). The validity of such criticism is itself questionable, however, when it reaches the extent of conflating Ṣūfī *tafsīr* with Ismā'īlī (*bāṭiniyya*) *ta'wīl*, which is an error that is commonly made.

Although both Ṣūfī *tafsīr* and Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* may share the designation of “*ta'wīl*” and are superficially similar, in fact they are two distinct kinds of hermeneutics. On the one hand, two significant features of Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* are as follows: first, its method derives from the foundation (*asās*) that is the Imām (as understood by Ismā'īlīs); and second, in Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* the object of the verses revealed by *ta'wīl* is also often the Imām (Walker 1993: 124–33 and 1994: 120; Habil 1987: 36; Nanji 1987: 192; Corbin 1975: 523; 1983: 99; Daftary 1990: 388).

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On the other hand, in Şūfī *tafsīr*, first of all, the method involves *kashf* (an unveiling to the heart or mind of the interpreter) – contingent not on the Imām but variously on the grace of God, the spiritual capacity and degree of understanding of the interpreter, and the degree of one’s spiritual effort. Second, in Şūfī *tafsīr* the object revealed and linked to the verse is generally related to Şūfī practice or doctrines – commonly involving, for example, ontological-cosmological, anthropological, or psychological aspects or categories. Typical ontological-cosmological categories that Şūfī commentators relate to certain verses are various levels of reality such as the *nāsūt* (human plane), *malakūt* (the suprasensible plane), *jabarūt* (the plane of Divine compelling), and *lāhūt* (the plane of Divine unity). Examples of anthropological categories are the *‘awāmm* (masses), *khāṣṣ* (elite), and *khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ* (the elite of the elite); or categories such as *‘arifūn* (gnostics), *‘āshiqūn* (lovers), *‘ulamā’* (scholars), *mu‘minūn* (believers), to name a few. Common psychological terms that Şūfīs relate to certain verses through *kashf* are faculties of consciousness such as the *nafs* (self), *qalb* (heart), *rūh* (spirit), and *sirr* (mystery); or states of consciousness such as *fanā’* (passing away in God) and *baqā’* (subsisting through God). By discovering through *kashf* relationships between Qur’ānic verses and various aspects of Şūfī practice and doctrine, Şūfī commentators provide a rich diversity of interpretations that contribute to producing the understanding that the Qur’ān is, as Walid Saleh expresses it, “the most polyvalent text in Islamic culture” (Saleh 2004: 154).

For the most part, in contrast to the fears of its critics, Şūfī *tafsīr* does not replace or invalidate the exoteric meanings of Qur’ānic verses by means of the results of *kashf* (unveiling); but rather, it adds to the exoteric meanings. In spite of the often obfuscating criticism, even Sunnī scholars such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), al-Shātibī (d. 790/1388), and Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 793/1390) accepted Şūfī *tafsīr* as being legitimate as long as certain conditions were met (Gätje 1976: 228–30; al-Dhahabī 1961: II, 357–8, 366–9; Qaṭṭān 1971: 309–10). One contemporary Azharī scholar even defended al-Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* (“The Truths of Commentary”) (see below) against the charge of being Ismā’īlī, stating that since al-Sulamī did not deny the exoteric meaning of the Qur’ān or declare it to be invalid, the *Ḥaqā’iq* should not be considered to be among the works of the Ismā’īlīs (*bāṭiniyya*) (Nuqrāshī 1984: 188).

Although many Şūfīs wrote commentaries on individual *sūras* such as *Sūrat Yūsuf* (Q 12) or particular verses, this survey only covers the Şūfī *tafsīrs* that are extant and that generally dealt with the whole of the Qur’ān (although such commentaries often omitted a significant number of verses per *sūra*). See Ateş (1974) for Şūfī *tafsīrs* that are outside the scope of this chapter.

Based largely upon the analysis of Gerhard Böwering (1991: 42–3) we can divide the history of Şūfī Qur’ān commentary into five phases. The elementary phase, lasting from the second/eighth to the fourth/tenth centuries, consists of two stages. The first of these two stages Böwering terms that of the “forebears” of Şūfī Qur’ān commentary. These are Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), the sixth Shi’ī Imam, Ja’far al-Şādiq (d. 148/765), and Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778). Of these three commentators, the most significant was Ja’far al-Şādiq, whose commentary (as recorded by al-Sulamī [d. 412/1021]) was transmitted to

his son, Imam Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 183/799), from him to his son, Imam ‘Alī Riḍā (d. 203/818), and from him through a chain of transmission to al-Sulamī that Böwering (1991: 53–5; 1995: 18–22; also Nwyia 1968) has shown to be historically problematic.

The elementary phase in its second stage consists of al-Sulamī’s commentary and the following seven Ṣūfīs who, in addition to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, were al-Sulamī’s primary sources: Dhū ‘l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 246/861), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899), al-Junayd (d. 298/910), Ibn ‘Aṭā’ al-Ādamī (d. 311/923), Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. 320/932), and al-Shiblī (d. 334/946). Of these, it is possible that only al-Tustarī, Ibn ‘Aṭā’, and al-Wāsiṭī may have been compilers of separate Ṣūfī Qur’ān commentaries (Nwyia 1973; Böwering 1991: 42). Al-Tustarī’s *tafsīr*, written in Arabic and published uncritically (al-Tustarī 2001), is the only *tafsīr* of these authors to survive independently. Böwering, in his thorough study of al-Tustarī’s *tafsīr* (1980: 129–30), showed that its structure is comprised of three main levels: al-Tustarī’s own commentary on Qur’ānic verses, his statements and those of pre-Islamic prophets on various mystical subjects, and comments inserted into the *tafsīr* by later Ṣūfīs.

Undoubtedly the most significant author of Ṣūfī Qur’ān commentary prior to the sixth/twelfth century is al-Sulamī, without whose commentaries almost the entirety of the Qur’ān commentary of the first generations of Ṣūfīs would have been lost. Sulamī, whose full name was Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn al-Sulamī al-Nīsābūrī, was a Shāfi‘ī, who around 325/937 (or 330/942) was born in Nīsābūr, where he also died in 412/1021. Böwering has published his edition of the unique manuscript of al-Sulamī’s minor commentary, *Ziyādāt Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* (1995), and is currently editing his major commentary, the *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr*, although it has recently been published uncritically (al-Sulamī 2001). These commentaries – both of which are in Arabic and consist of esoteric commentary on selected verses of the Qur’ān arranged in accordance with the Qur’ān’s traditional order – are almost entirely compilations of commentaries of earlier Ṣūfīs, whose names al-Sulamī cited. Ateş briefly discussed each of al-Sulamī’s seventy-four primary Ṣūfī sources (1969: 76–95). Although al-Sulamī’s *tafsīrs* are essentially collections of the exegeses of other Ṣūfīs, his creative genius is evident in the fact that it is largely through his work that the Qur’ānic commentaries of the early Ṣūfīs have been preserved. Al-Sulamī himself stated that the very reason he composed his commentary was because he saw that authorities of the exoteric sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-zawāhīr*) had written much about the exoteric implications of the Qur’ān, but that no one had collected the understanding of the Qur’ān as expressed by the “folk of the truth” (*ahl al-ḥaqīqa*), which is to say, by the Ṣūfīs. The *tafsīrs* most directly influenced by al-Sulamī are those of al-Daylamī, Rūzbihān al-Baqī, and Gisūdirāz, which will be discussed below. In addition, an influence of al-Sulamī’s *tafsīr* upon Shī‘ite literature is seen in the *Sharḥ Tawḥīd al-Ṣadūq* (“Explanation of [the book] ‘Affirming Unity’ of [al-Shaykh] al-Ṣadūq [Ibn Bābawayh]”) of Qāḍī Sa‘īd al-Qummī (d. after 1107/1696), who borrowed liberally from *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr*’s commentary on *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (Q 1) (al-Qummī 1994: 626–35). The overall importance of al-Sulamī’s commentaries has been highlighted by Böwering, who has asserted that al-Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq* is to Ṣūfīs what al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* is to the Sunnī

community as a whole and that al-Sulamī's commentaries are as important to sixteenth/twelfth-century Şūfism as Ibn 'Arabī's major works are to later Şūfism (Böwering 1991: 56).

The second phase of Şūfī *tafsīr*, lasting from the fifth/eleventh to the seventh/thirteenth centuries, consists of three different forms: moderate Şūfī commentaries, esoteric commentaries deeply indebted to al-Sulamī, and commentaries written in Persian. Moderate commentaries are those that include esoteric Şūfī *tafsīr* as well as commentary based on transmissions (*riwāyāt*) from Muḥammad, companions, and early commentators as well as discussion of syntax, grammar, historical context, *fiqh*, and similar exoteric questions. One work of the "moderate" form is *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān* ("The Unveiling and Elucidation of Commentary on the Qur'ān") of Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) (Saleh 2004), better known for his *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ("The Brides of the Assemblies concerning the Tales of the Prophets"). Al-Tha'labī, who had read the entirety of the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* to al-Sulamī himself, included in his commentary not only Şūfī *ishārāt*, but *ḥadīth*, commentaries of the early Muslim generations, *Isrā'īliyyāt*, and discussions of syntax and *fiqh*. Hence, Ateş considered it to be both an exoteric (*zāhir*) and a Şūfī esoteric (*bāṭin*) work (Ateş 1974: 97). Saleh (2004: 65, 224), more recently, convincingly argues that Tha'labī was not a Şūfī, and that his *tafsīr* should be considered an encyclopedic commentary that includes "a mystical level of interpretation" among its many other aspects.

Another example of this "moderate" form is 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1074) *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* ("The Subtleties of the Allusions"), written in Arabic and examined to a degree by R. Ahmad (1969: 16–69) and by its modern editor, al-Basyūnī (al-Qushayrī 1971: I, 3–37). In the *Laṭā'if*, al-Qushayrī – who was a Shāfi'ī – for the most part explicated the literal meaning of Qur'ānic verses, although at times he discussed the esoteric meanings of a verse. In spite of the fact that al-Qushayrī, unlike al-Sulamī, did not cite earlier authorities, Ateş (1974: 100) maintained that al-Qushayrī frequently utilized al-Sulamī's *tafsīr*, borrowing poetry from al-Sulamī and contemplating al-Sulamī's *tafsīr* while writing the *Laṭā'if*. In addition to the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, al-Qushayrī wrote another Şūfī commentary which is still in manuscript, "The Great Commentary" (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*), and which has briefly been discussed by Böwering (1989: 571).

A final example of "moderate" commentary of this period is the Arabic *tafsīr*, *Nughbat al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* ("Gulps of Elucidation concerning Commentary on the Qur'ān") of Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Ḥafs 'Umar b. Muḥammad al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), the famous Shāfi'ī author of the Şūfī manual *'Awārif al-ma'ārif* ("The Benefits of the Forms of Knowledge"). It is extant only in manuscripts (GAL: SI, 789, no. 4), one of which was copied with the permission (*ijāza*) of al-Suhrawardī himself (Ateş 1974: 161). According to Ateş (1974: 162), *Nughbat al-bayān* is largely an exoterically oriented *tafsīr*, although to a certain extent it does deal with asceticism (*zuhd*).

In addition to "moderate" *tafsīrs*, another subcategory of Şūfī *tafsīrs* of the second historical phase are those that contain primarily esoteric Şūfī commentary. Although these rely to a great extent on al-Sulamī, they cannot be considered to be part of a

“school” of commentaries; and they were written in Arabic. *Taṣḍīq al-ma‘ārif* (“The Confirmation of the Forms of Knowledge”) or, as it is also titled, *Futūḥ al-Raḥmān fī ishārāt al-Qur‘ān* (“The Openings of the Compassionate concerning the Allusions of the Qur‘ān”) was written by the little known Sunnī Ṣūfī, Abū Thābit ‘Abd al-Mālik al-Daylamī (d. 598/1193) and was only recently discovered by Böwering (and is still unpublished). Although commentary from al-Sulamī’s authorities in the *Ḥaqā‘iq al-tafsīr* comprises about half of al-Daylamī’s *tafsīr*, al-Daylamī did not just directly import this material, but rather seems to have elaborated on it. The source of the remaining half of the content of the *Taṣḍīq al-ma‘ārif* is al-Daylamī himself (Böwering 1987: 232).

The other *tafsīr* of the primarily esoteric subcategory of the second phase, ‘*Arā’is al-bayān fī ḥaqā‘iq al-Qur‘ān* (“The Brides of Elucidation concerning the Truths of the Qur‘ān”) – written by the Shāfi‘ī Ṣūfī, Abū Muḥammad Rūzbihān b. Abī Naṣr al-Baqī al-Shīrāzī (d. 606/1209) – is similar to *Taṣḍīq al-ma‘ārif* in a number of ways, while also exhibiting some differences. Like al-Daylamī’s *tafsīr*, Rūzbihān’s ‘*Arā’is al-bayān* is an esoteric Ṣūfī *tafsīr*, written in Arabic, and composed almost equally of material from earlier *tafsīrs* and commentary from the author himself. Among the differences between the two *tafsīrs* is that (in addition to using his own commentary) Rūzbihān directly borrowed from both of al-Sulamī’s two *tafsīrs*, quoting his authorities verbatim without any embellishment. Consequently, the ‘*Arā’is al-bayān* became the primary vehicle for the transmission of much of al-Sulamī’s *Ziyādāt* for nine hundred years (until Böwering’s recent discovery and publication of the *Ziyādāt*); and the ‘*Arā’is* is the only major witness to the unique manuscript of the *Ziyādāt*. A second significant difference between al-Daylamī’s *tafsīr* and that of Rūzbihān is that Rūzbihān included much Ṣūfī material from al-Qushayrī’s *Laṭā‘if al-ishārāt* in the ‘*Arā’is*; while al-Daylamī apparently did not utilize al-Qushayrī as a source (Böwering 1987: 232). A final point concerning the ‘*Arā’is al-bayān* is that although it was published in lithograph (al-Baqī 1884), it is rare and riddled with significant errors. Hence Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣawī began an edition, which is now being followed by Godlas, who, after having located sixty-five manuscripts, is working on a critical edition, translation, and study of its entirety (Godlas 1991: 33; 1996: 31).

The entirely Persian commentaries of the second phase are those of al-Maybūdī (d. 530/1135) and al-Darwājikī (d. 549/1154–5). The first of these, Abū l-Faḍl Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybūdī’s published *tafsīr*, *Kashf al-asrār wa ‘uddat al-abrār* (“The Unveiling of the Secrets and the Provisioning of the Pious”), is known as the commentary of the Khwājah ‘Abdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), since it contains much of the esoteric commentary of al-Anṣārī, whose *madhhab* was Ḥanbalī. Nevertheless, al-Maybūdī (whose *madhhab* was Shāfi‘ī) added his own esoteric commentary, extensive traditional *tafsīr bi’l-riwāya* (by means of transmitted material from earlier sources), and other exoteric commentary on matters such as variant readings, *fiqh*, and contexts of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), as well as a literal translation of the Qur‘ānic Arabic into Persian. The literature on *Kashf al-asrār* has been surveyed by Masarrat (1995); and papers delivered at a conference on Maybūdī were edited by Pindarī (1995). The *Kashf al-asrār* has also been the subject of a study by Keeler (2006).

Concerning the other Persian *tafsīr* of the second phase, there is some confusion regarding both the name of al-Darwājikī and the title of his unpublished Persian *tafsīr*, which appears to have been composed in Bukhara in the year 519/1125 (Storey 1927–39: I/1, 4). Böwering only lists the *nisba*, al-Darwājikī, along with his death date, 549/1154 (Böwering 1991: 42). Storey at first listed his name as Abū Naṣr Aḥmad b. Ḥasan b. Aḥmad Sulaymān, noted that he was “commonly called “Zāhidī,”” and in a footnote mentioned the *nisba* al-Dardājikī (Storey 1927–39: I/1, 4). Later, Storey gave a few more possibilities for his name and *nisba* (including al-Darwājikī) along with the *laqab* (honorific) Sayf al-Dīn but noted that a manuscript discussed by Ritter provided a nearly identical author’s name – Abū Naṣr Aḥmad b. Ḥasan b. Aḥmad – whose *nisba* was tentatively “al-Darani” and whose death was in 549/1154–5 (Storey 1953: I/2, 1190). Various titles given to the *tafsīr* are *Tafsīr-i Zāhidī*, *Tafsīr-i Sayf-al-Dīn*, *Latā’if al-tafsīr* (“The Subtleties of Commentary”) (Storey 1927–39: I/1, 4; 1953: I/2, 1190), and *Tafsīr-i Zāhid*, *Tafsīr-i DRwājikī* (an upper-case consonant indicating that a subsequent short vowel is unknown), and *Latā’if al-tafāsīr* (Nāṣirī and Dānish’ Pazhūh 1990: 218). Storey listed a number of manuscripts (most of which are partial) and also noted that a characteristic of this *tafsīr* is the recurrence of the Arabic phrase, *Qāla al-Shaykh al-imām al-zāhid* (the shaykh, the ascetic, the leader [or the ascetic leader] said) (Storey 1927–39: I/1, 1190).

The third phase of Şūfī commentary, written from the beginning of the seventh/thirteenth to the middle of the eighth/fourteenth century, consists of what Böwering has termed the commentaries of Şūfī “schools,” most importantly those of Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā (Abū ’l-Jannāb Aḥmad b. ’Umar) (d. 618/1221) and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ’Arabī (d. 638/1240) (Böwering 1991: 42–3). One of the most urgent needs in the scholarship of Şūfī *tafsīr* is the publication of the collective *tafsīr* of the Kubrāwiyya tradition, often known as the *al-Ta’wīlāt al-najmiyya* (“The Najmī Exegeses”), commonly thought to have been so named because it was begun by Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā. In the most recent examination of the problematic authorship of this *tafsīr*, J. Elias concluded that Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā (a Shāfi’ī from Khwārazm) may have written the first part – from the beginning of the Qur’ān to *Sūrat al-Dhāriyāt* (Q 51), verse 19 – entirely by himself. Another possibility noted by Elias is that al-Kubrā’s disciple, Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Dāya (d. 654/1256), may have written part of it. The first part – containing both exoteric and esoteric *tafsīr* – has been variously titled *’Ayn al-ḥayāt* (“The Spring of Life”), *al-’Awārif* (“The Benefits”), and *Baḥr al-ḥaqā’iq* (“The Ocean of the Truths”) (al-Dhahabī 1961: II, 395; Elias 1995: 204–5). Nevertheless, *Baḥr al-ḥaqā’iq* also appears to have been the title of a different *tafsīr* written by Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī (Ateş 1974: 142–4; Shpall 1981–4, regarding Ms. Süleymaniye-Hasan Hüsnü MS. 37 *mukarrar*). Elias has demonstrated, however, that ’Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336) wrote a distinct commentary, one of the names of which is *Tafsīr Najm al-Qur’ān* (“The Commentary: The Star of the Qur’ān”) and which is entirely esoteric. It begins with *Sūrat al-Tūr* (Q 52) and covers the remainder of the Qur’ān, although it is prefaced by a long introduction and commentary on the *Fātiḥa* and in various manuscripts begins when the *tafsīr* of al-Kubrā/al-Rāzī leaves off (Elias 1995: 203–12; al-Dhahabī 1961: 395). The introduction was edited by Nwyia (1973–7: 141–57) and studied by Corbin

(1978: 121–44). Elias edited various excerpts of al-Simnānī's *tafsīr*, basing his edition on two related manuscripts, one of which (Süleymaniye-Şehit Ali Paşa, Ms. 165) was collated with al-Simnānī's own copy (Elias 1991: 281–321; 1995: 203, 207). Elias also discussed al-Simnānī's understanding of the Qur'ān – explicitly expressed in his *tafsīr* – noting that according to al-Simnānī one can become transformed into a mirror for divine attributes by contemplating the Qur'ān (Elias 1995: 107–10).

Another *tafsīr* related to the Kubrawī school is that of the Shāfi'ī scholar Niẓām al-Dīn Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn al-Qummī al-Nīsābūrī (d. 728/1327, but this is problematic). Although his commentary, *Tafsīr Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān wa-raqhā'ib al-furqān* ("The Commentary: Marvels of the Qur'ān and Desire of the Criterion") (1904–12), is largely a traditional exoteric *tafsīr*, it includes significant Ṣūfī commentary, most of which – as the author himself stated – came from Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Dāya (al-Nīsābūrī 1912: XXX, 223; Ayāzī 1994: 528; al-Dhahabī 1961: I, 321). Al-Zarqānī noted that after al-Nīsābūrī discussed the exoteric meaning (*ẓāhir ma'nā*) of a verse, he would write, "The people of 'allusion' (*ishāra*) say.... Or, he simply wrote '*al-ta'wīl*' and thereafter explicated the esoteric meaning (*al-ma'nā al-ishārī*) of the verse" (al-Zarqānī 1943: II, 82). Mahmoud Ayoub has translated excerpts of the Ṣūfī component of al-Nīsābūrī's *tafsīr* (1984, 1992).

Ibn 'Arabī's school of Qur'ān commentary, influenced mainly by his own writings and to a lesser degree by his predecessor, Ibn Barrajān, was continued by al-Qāshānī and al-Şafadī (Böwering 1991: 43), although the connection of al-Şafadī to this school is problematic. These *tafsīrs* consist of independently composed commentaries that nevertheless are united by their common usage of Ibn 'Arabī's terms and concepts. According to Ateş (1974: 130–1) – who described various manuscripts of the *tafsīr* of 'Abd al-Salām b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Abū 'l-Ḥakam al-Ishbīlī, known as Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141) – the *tafsīr* of Ibn Barrajān greatly influenced Ibn 'Arabī. In addition, Ateş (1974: 178–9, 187–8) argued that a partial commentary – from *Sūrat Yūnus* (Q 10) to *Sūrat al-Tūr* (Q 52) – by Ibn 'Arabī is extant (Ms. Şehid 'Alī Paşa 62) and that it was a model for the commentary of al-Qāshānī. If Ateş has indeed correctly identified Ibn 'Arabī as the author of this manuscript, its publication is another of the major needs of the field.

Böwering (1991: 43) noted that the *tafsīr* of al-Şafadī (d. 696/1296) – whose full name was Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf b. Hilāl b. Abī 'l-Barakāt al-Ḥalabī al-Ḥanafī Abū 'l-Faḍā'il al-Şafadī – was influenced by Ibn 'Arabī's school of thought. Ateş (1974: 197) demonstrated that this unpublished *tafsīr*, the title of which is *Kashf al-asrār fi hatk al-astār* ("The Unveiling of the Mysteries concerning the Rending of the Veils"), had been mistakenly attributed to Ibn 'Arabī himself. Although Ateş, in the table of contents of *İşārī tefsīr okulu* (1974: 202), lists al-Şafadī's *tafsīr* as being among those that were influenced by the "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) (which is an important doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī's "school"), later, however, in his discussion of al-Şafadī's exegetical method, Ateş concluded by stating that al-Şafadī's *tafsīr* did not exhibit the characteristics of the "unity of being."

In contrast to al-Şafadī, the *tafsīr* of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 730/1330) clearly exhibits the influence of the "unity of being." This is a major reason why even to this day al-Qāshānī's *tafsīr* (1981) is known as the "*Tafsīr* of Ibn 'Arabī." Studied by Pierre

Lory (1980), excerpts of this *tafsīr* have been translated into English by Ayoub (1984, 1992). The most recent contribution to the *tafsīrs* of the “school” of Ibn ‘Arabī is a contemporary collection of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Şūfī exegeses found throughout his works and compiled by M. Ghurāb (Ayāzī 1994: 464–9).

The commentaries written in India and in regions ruled by the Ottomans and Timurids comprise the fourth phase of Şūfī *tafsīr*, the period from the ninth/fifteenth to the twelfth/eighteenth centuries. Of all the Şūfī *tafsīrs* written during this period, the *tafsīrs* of Gīsūdirāz, al-Kāshifī, al-Nakhjiwānī, ‘Azīz Maḥmūd Hūdāyī, and İsmail Hakkı Bursevī are the most noteworthy. Although the Naqshbandīs Khwājah Muḥammad Pārsā (d. 822/1419) and Ya‘qūb al-Charkhī (d. 851/1447) wrote *tafsīrs* that contain some Şūfī content, these did not cover the whole of the Qur’ān and so will not be dealt with here.

The great Chishtī shaykh, Sayyid Abū ‘l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Ḥusaynī, known as Khwājah Bandah ‘nawāz, is also commonly referred to by his ancestral name of Gīsūdirāz (longhair) (d. 825/1422). He was a Ḥanafī shaykh who spent his life in Delhi and the Deccan during the periods of Tughlaq and Bahmanid rule and wrote a still unpublished Şūfī *tafsīr* (almost entirely in Arabic) titled *Tafsīr-i Multaqaṭ* (“Commentary [consisting] of Unexpectedly Found Things”) that deals largely with Şūfī themes (in contrast to the assertion of M. Sālim al-Qidwā’ī) (Hussaini 1983: 20). It is similar in structure to but not dependent upon the ‘Arā’is *al-bayān*, which is to say that like Rūzbihān, Gīsūdirāz cited numerous verbatim passages directly from Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* (which he indicated by “*Ḥaqā’iq*”) and from al-Qushayrī’s *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* (indicated by “*Laṭā’if*”); but he included significant commentary that is apparently his own – commentary that is preceded by the designation *al-multaqaṭ*. Hussaini (1983: 11–13) briefly discussed the *tafsīr* and the manuscripts, one nearly complete and one partial manuscript of which are extant in the India Office (nos. 109–11), while a partial copy is held in Lucknow.

The well-known author Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī Wā’iz-i Kāshifī (d. 910/1504–5 in Herat) wrote the Persian Qur’ān commentary *Mawāhib-i ‘ālīya* (“The Sublime Gifts”), which is also known as the *Tafsīr-i Ḥusaynī*. Although *Mawāhib-i ‘ālīya* (1938, uncritically published) is largely a translation and exoteric commentary on the Qur’ān, it has a significant and evocative Şūfī component. Kāshifī – who was the brother-in-law of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī and father of Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Alī Şāfī (who authored the Naqshbandī hagiography *Rashaḥāt ‘ayn al-ḥayāt* [“Percolations of the Spring of Life”]) – was a prominent figure in Timurid Herat and an initiate in the Sunnī Naqshbandī order. Nevertheless, the question of his *madhhab* is problematic. Some sources stated that he was a Ḥanafī, others a Shāfī’ī, and still others a Shī’ite. Whatever the case may be, his *tafsīr* (completed 899/1494) is described as being written in the style of the *ahl-i sunnat wa-jamā’at* (i.e., the Sunnīs) and does not exhibit Shī’ī characteristics (Kāshifī 1938: 13–21, 79). There are three kinds of Şūfī materials that Kāshifī cites in the *Mawāhib-i ‘ālīya*: earlier Şūfī *tafsīrs*, general Şūfī prose treatises, and Persian Şūfī poetry. Most of the Şūfī material in the *tafsīr* derives from the Şūfī commentaries of al-Sulamī, al-Qushayrī, al-Anṣārī/al-Maybudī, and the Kubrawī school, although he occasionally cites other Şūfī *tafsīrs* such as that of al-Qāshānī and possibly al-Darwājikī (referred to by

“al-Zāhid”). Among the Persian Šūfī poets he frequently cites are Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Sanā’ī, and Khwājah ‘Abd Allāh al-Anšārī. He also quotes from a number of other Šūfī texts, among them being Ibn ‘Arabī’s *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* and a variety of works of Jāmī.

Ni‘mat Allāh b. Maḥmūd al-Nakhjiwānī (or al-Nakhjuwānī) (d. 920/1514), a Ḥanafī Naqshbandī shaykh, wrote in Arabic the Šūfī *tafsīr* titled *al-Fawātiḥ al-ilāhiyya wa’l-mafātiḥ al-ghaybiyya* (“Divine Openings and Unmanifest Keys”) (1907, uncritically published). Originally from Nakhjiwān in Azerbaijan, Bābā Ni‘mat Allāh (or Shaykh ‘Alwān, as he was also known) completed his *tafsīr* in 902/1497 in Tabriz, and from there emigrated to Akşehir in Anatolia, where he spent the last sixteen years of his life and where his grave was well known. He did not cite any other Šūfī *tafsīrs* and appears to have written *al-Fawātiḥ al-ilāhiyya* without consulting any sources. Although he commented on every verse of the Qur’ān, the vast majority of his exegesis consists of brief traditional exoteric commentary clarifying the meaning of words. Nevertheless, in his substantial introduction to the *tafsīr*, at the beginning and end of every *sūra*, and periodically throughout his *tafsīr*, Nakhjiwānī included Šūfī-oriented material involving the terminology and concepts of the school of Ibn ‘Arabī (Nakhjiwānī 1907: ii (preface), 2–3; Ayāzī 1994: 563–6).

Aziz Mahmud Hüdai (1038/1628), the prolific Turkish shaykh of the Jalwatī or Celveti Šūfī order, who lived most of his adult life in Uskudar (across the Bosphorus from Istanbul), gave discourses on the Qur’ān that after his death were composed into a *tafsīr* titled *Nafā’is al-majālis* (“The Gems of the Assemblies”). Written in Arabic (but still unpublished), for the most part this *tafsīr* consists of exoteric commentary interspersed at times with Šūfī commentary dealing with aspects of the Šūfī path, aspects such as asceticism (*zuhd*), “consciousness of God” (*taqwā*), and “passing away in God” (*fanā’ fi Allāh*). Although it has been asserted that Hüdai wrote his *tafsīr* without referring to any other *tafsīrs*, Ateş observed the influence of al-Sulamī on at least a part of the *Nafā’is* (Yılmaz 1980: 111; Ateş 1974: 231).

The most extensive and comprehensive of all the Šūfī *tafsīrs* written during this period is the *Rūḥ al-bayān* (“The Spirit of Elucidation”) by İsmail Hakkı Bursevī (also variously written Bursavi, Bursalı, and, in Arabic, İsmā’īl Ḥaqqī al-Burūsawī) (d. 1137/1725). Bursevī, a prolific scholar, like Hüdai was a Šūfī shaykh of the Celveti/Jalwatī order. A Ḥanafī, İsmail Hakkı lived most of his life in Istanbul and Bursa. *Rūḥ al-bayān* (1866?, published uncritically), written largely in Arabic, has both traditional exoteric and Šūfī dimensions. It includes İsmail Hakkı’s own commentaries as well as quoted material from the *tafsīrs* of the Kubrawī school, in addition to material from al-Sulamī, al-Qushayrī, Ibn ‘Arabī/al-Qāshānī, Rūzbihān, and Kāshifī. Furthermore, into his *tafsīr* he weaves Persian poetry from the likes of Ḥāfiz, Sa’dī, Rūmī, and ‘Aṭṭār. *Rūḥ al-bayān* is similar to Kāshifī’s *Mawāhib-i ‘aliyya*; although the *Rūḥ al-bayān* is more massive and has a greater emphasis on Šūfī *tafsīr*.

The final period in the history of Šūfī *tafsīr*, from the thirteenth/nineteenth century until today, includes the *tafsīrs* of Ibn ‘Ajība, Pānīpatī, al-Alūsī, Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh, Şafī ‘Alī Shāh, and Mullā Ḥuwaysh. First of all, Aḥmad b. ‘Ajība (d. 1224/1809), a Moroccan Šūfī, was the author of the *tafsīr* titled *al-Baḥr al-madīd fi tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-majīd* (“The Immense Ocean concerning Commentary on the Glorious Qur’ān”) (1999), which has

largely been neglected by scholars of *tafsīr* outside of Morocco. Ibn ‘Ajība, an initiate of the Darqāwī order, stated that he combined in his *tafsīr* “both the explanations (*ibāra*) of the exoterics (*ahl al-zāhir*) with the allusions (*ishāra*) of the esoterics (*ahl al-bāṭin*)”; and hence, as we would expect, it contains significant Şūfī commentary (Ibn ‘Ajība 1990: 38–9; Michon 1968–9: 40; 1973: 108–14, 274–5). Although most of the Şūfī sources of his *tafsīr* are from North Africa, Andalus, or Egypt, he also quotes from Iranian scholars such as al-Qushayrī and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī. Ibn ‘Ajība’s quotations from Rūzbihān have hitherto gone unnoticed because Ibn ‘Ajība referred to him as “al-WRTjbi” (Ibn ‘Ajība 1999 I: 67, 466, 478 and *passim*).

The *tafsīr* of Pānīpatī, titled *Tafsīr al-Maḏharī* (“The Commentary related to Maḏhar”), was written in Arabic by Qāḏī Thanā’ Allāh ‘Uthmānī Fānī Fatī (Pānīpatī) (d. 1225/1810), a Ḥanafī and Naqshbandī shaykh. The commentary has been published in ten volumes and was named after Qāḏī Thanā’ Allāh’s Naqshbandī shaykh, Mīrzā Maḏhar Jān-i Jānān (1197/1780). Both Böwering and Ayāzī regard Pānīpatī’s *tafsīr* as a Şūfī *tafsīr*, and Ayāzī also groups it among the Şūfī *tafsīrs* that use the hermeneutics of allusion (*al-ishārī*) (Böwering 1991: 43; Ayāzī 1994: 833, 850). Nevertheless, Ayāzī (1994: 366) states that in spite of the fact that Qāḏī Thanā’ Allāh (who lived most of his life in the North Indian state of Haryana) was a Naqshbandī Şūfī in the lineage of Aḥmad Sirhindī, his *tafsīr* consists almost entirely of exoteric commentary and only rarely deals with “esoteric matters” (*rumūz*) and “mystical allusions” (*ishārāt*).

Abū ‘l-Thanā Shihāb al-Dīn Sayyid Maḥmūd b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥusaynī al-Alūsī al-Baghdādī, known commonly as Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī, was one of the most important nineteenth-century Iraqī scholars and was the author of the well-known Arabic Qur’ān commentary *Rūḥ al-ma‘ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm wa sab‘ al-mathānī* (“The Spirit of the Meanings concerning Commentary on the Qur’ān and the Seven Oft-repeated Verses [i.e., al-Fātiḥa (Q 1)]”) (1933–4). Al-Alūsī lived most of his life in Baghdad, where he died in 1270/1854. Affiliated with the Naqshbandī *ṭarīqa* of Mawlānā Khālīd al-Baghdādī (d. 1242/1827), he was the *muftī* of Baghdad for a number of years and was regarded as the shaykh of the scholars of Iraq (al-Dhahabī 1976: I, 352–3; *EI2* 2004: “Alūsī”). Some sources assert that he was a Shāfi‘ī; others, however, maintain that he was a Ḥanafī (Ateş 1974: 250). Although his massive *tafsīr* deals largely with exoteric matters, it does indeed have a significant Şūfī component, one that is often introduced by the phrase *min bāb al-ishāra* (“from the domain of allusion”). A biographer of al-Alūsī has stated that among the Şūfī commentators upon whom al-Alūsī relied were Ibn ‘Arabī, al-Tustarī, and Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī (‘Abd al-Ḥamīd 1968: 207–9). In addition, al-Alūsī relied upon Rūzbihān al-Baqlī. This, however, had gone unnoticed because al-Alūsī – on numerous occasions without attribution – quoted the ‘*Arā’is al-bayān* verbatim or creatively integrated passages from it into his *tafsīr* (al-Alūsī 1933–4: *passim*).

Ḥājji Mīrzā Ḥasan Işfahānī, known as Şafī ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1317/1899), wrote his unique Şūfī *tafsīr* in Persian poetry. Titled simply *Tafsīr-i Qur’ān* (“Commentary on the Qur’ān”), it has been published in one large-size volume. Regarded as one of nineteenth-century Iran’s premier poets, Şafī ‘Alī Shāh was a Shī‘ī Şūfī shaykh of a branch of the Ni‘matallāhī order known as the Şafī ‘Alī Shāhī or Şafā‘iyya order, an order that was

closely connected to the Qājār court (Pourjavady and Wilson 1978: 252–3). In his *tafsīr*, written in Persian rhymed couplets (*mathnawī*) but also containing the Arabic text of the Qurʾān with a Persian prose translation, Ṣafī ʿAlī Shāh dealt with conventional exoteric subjects (such as various Qurʾānic narratives) but also frequently linked the Qurʾān to explications of Ṣūfī metaphysics and the Ṣūfī path (Ṣafī ʿAlī Shāh n.d.).

Sulṭān Muḥammad b. Haydar Muḥammad b. Sulṭān Muḥammad Junābādī (Gunābādī) (d. 1327/1909), a Shīʿī Ṣūfī known as Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, was the author of the published Arabic Qurʾān commentary *Bayān al-saʿāda fī maqāmāt al-ʿibāda* (“The Elucidation of Felicity concerning the Stations of Worship”) (Ayāzī 1994: 212). Originally from Bīdukht, a village in the vicinity of Gunābād (Iran), Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh was a shaykh in the Gunābādī branch of the Niʿmatallāhī Ṣūfī order. In his *tafsīr*, Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh included exoteric commentary as well as Ṣūfī commentary. Although Āghā Buzurg Tihirānī stated that Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh had been accused of plagiarism, Ayāzī refuted these allegations (Ayāzī 1994: 214–15; Pourjavady and Wilson 1978: 252).

ʿAbd al-Qādir b. Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥuwaysh b. Maḥmūd Āl Ghāzī al-ʿĀnī, known as Mullā Ḥuwaysh, was the author of the Qurʾān commentary *Bayān al-maʿānī ʿalā ḥasab tartīb al-nuzūl* (“The Elucidation of the Meanings according to the Order of Revelation”). Mullā Ḥuwaysh, an Ashʿarī Ḥanafī, did not compose this Arabic *tafsīr* in accordance with the traditional ordering of the *sūras*. Instead, he arranged his *tafsīr* according to the chronological order of revelation. The *tafsīr*, written in 1936–7, consists of both exoteric and Ṣūfī material (although its Ṣūfī material only plays a very minor role) (Ḥuwaysh 1964–5). According to Ayāzī, among the Ṣūfī *tafsīrs* on which the author relies are those of Ibn ʿArabī/al-Qāshānī, al-Nakhjiwānī, ʿIsmail Hakkī, and al-Alūsī. He also utilized well-known general Ṣūfī works such as al-Qushayrī’s *al-Risāla* (“The Treatise”), al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (“The Revival of the Sciences of Religion”), Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī’s *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif* (“The Benefits of the Forms of Knowledge”), and ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī’s *al-Insān al-kāmil* (“The Perfect Man”). In addition, he made use of two late Naqshbandī works, Shaykh Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Muṣṭafā al-Khānī’s (d. 1279/1862) *al-Bahja al-saniyya fī ʿādāb al-ṭarīqa al-Naqshbandiyya* (“Brilliant Splendor concerning the Etiquette of the Naqshbandī Path”), and Asʿad b. Maḥmūd Ṣāhib al-Naqshbandī al-Khālīdī’s (d. 1347/1928) *Nūr al-hidāya waʾl-ʿirfān fī sirr al-rābiṭa waʾl-tawajjuh wa khatm al-Khwājākān* (“The Light of Guidance and Gnosis concerning the Mystery of [the Practices of] Establishing a Connection [with one’s shaykh], Turning one’s Face, and Completing [the Mention of] the Masters”) (Ayāzī 1994: 218–21).

Böwering (1991: 43) has stated that with the coming of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, the genre of Ṣūfī *tafsīr* began “a phase of certain decline that seems to continue today.” Nevertheless, because we now know of three *tafsīrs* composed in this final phase that Böwering did not mention (those of Ibn ʿAjība, Ṣafī ʿAlī Shāh, and Mullā Ḥuwaysh, the first two of which have a strong Ṣūfī dimension), it seems prudent to abandon the assessment that this recent phase of Ṣūfī *tafsīr* is characterized by “certain decline.” In addition, a number of Ṣūfī *tafsīrs* are now on the Internet (altafsir.com); and as more Ṣūfī *tafsīrs* become published and translated into various languages, this will make them available to large audiences for the first time. Hence, it is certainly possible, if not

probable, that this will bring about an increase in both the appreciation of Şūfī *tafsīrs* and the production of them. One obstacle to this, however, is the current tendency in Western scholarship to minimize the importance of critical editions of texts. It is hoped that scholars will realize that without such editions, our efforts to understand Şūfī *tafsīr* will remain severely impaired.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 28

Rūmī

Jawid Mojaddedi

Mawlānā's mystic book, the *Mathnawī*,
Is the Qur'ān in Persian poetry.¹

The relationship between Muslim mystics and religious scholars has been remarkably harmonious for the greater part of Islamic history, especially in view of the increasing tensions in recent times. One issue of conflict which arises, perhaps inevitably, between mystics and theologians of any religion, namely the question of revelation after the canon of scriptures, has also been debated among Muslims. However, contrary to popular belief (including among many contemporary Muslims themselves), most Muslims in the course of history have held the view that Islamic revelation is not limited to the Qur'ān. While the majority of Sunnī Muslims regard at least the prophet's normative example, or *sunna*, which was eventually compiled in *ḥadīth* collections more than 200 years after his death, as constituting a form of revelation, Shī'ī Muslims add to this the revelation received by the Imāms who succeeded Muḥammad in his role as a spiritual guide and political leader, as well as that received by his highly revered daughter Fāṭima, through whom the Imāms are his direct blood descendants. Historically, most Ṣūfīs have been affiliated to one of the Sunnī legal schools, and thus the Ṣūfī view that revelation continues to be inspired in Friends of God (*awliyā'*), or adept mystics, of successive generations has been held by a large proportion of Sunnī Muslims. In this way, divine inspiration received by Friends of God (*ilhām*) supplements the Qur'ān and the *sunna* as revelation for many Sunnī Muslims in a way that is comparable with the Shī'ī notion that revelation from God and communication with Him must always be possible for certain members of humanity. The Ṣūfī author Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj

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(d. 377/988) refers to these different types of revelation in the introduction of his *Kitāb al-luma‘ fī l-taṣawwuf* (“The Book of Flashes concerning Ṣūfism”), the oldest surviving Ṣūfī manual: “Nothing is known or comprehended other than what is present in the book of God, what has been transmitted about the messenger of God and what has been revealed to the hearts of Friends of God” (al-Sarrāj 1914: 1–2).

This statement of Ṣūfī epistemology is confirmed by the structure of discourse in Ṣūfī manuals since the time of al-Sarrāj. Typically, the discussion of any topic begins with a citation from the Qur’ān and *ḥadīths*, followed by the opinions of Ṣūfī authorities. Deference is thus expressed to the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīth*. However, the reports transmitted about the opinions and actions of Friends of God account for the vast majority of the content of Ṣūfī manuals and are not restricted to commentary on Qur’ānic verses and *ḥadīths*. They serve as an additional source of authoritative knowledge for Ṣūfism, and are arguably the most important of the three.

Rūmī

The most well-known Ṣūfī across the world today is Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Balkhī (d. 671/1273), better known in the Middle East as Mawlānā (Turkish: Mevlana; “Our lord”) and in Europe and North America as Rūmī (“the Anatolian”). Born in the province of Balkh, in what is now the border region between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, he migrated with his family as a small child and eventually settled in Konya. As an adult, Rūmī wrote a vast amount of mystical poetry, most famous among which are his collection of thousands of lyrical poems, or *ghazals*, and his *magnum opus*, the *Mathnawī*, which is a poem of some 26,000 rhyming couplets (see further Lewis 2000: 271–85). Rūmī was the rare combination of a poet recognized as being among the very best in his literary tradition, as well as a highly revered Ṣūfī master. The Mevlevi order, which was formed by his disciples, was named after him. It grew into a highly influential religious institution, especially during Ottoman times, and is today one of the most popular orders among the growing community of Ṣūfīs in North America and Europe, where its members are better known as the “whirling dervishes” because of their distinctive dance ritual.

Translations of Rūmī’s poetry have topped bestseller lists in North America and Europe in recent years, after selections of it were rendered into English by contemporary poets on the basis of more literal translations made previously by academicians. For the sake of accessibility, best-selling Rūmī translators such as Coleman Barks tend to omit culture-specific images and references which would be unfamiliar for their readership. While they have been highly successful in popularizing Rūmī, their approach has had the effect of obscuring the fact that he makes heavy use of the Qur’ān (as well as other Islamic sources). While it may not be essential for understanding Rūmī’s mystical message to appreciate his use of the Qur’ān, an exploration of this aspect will help elucidate this Ṣūfī master and poet’s understanding of the Qur’ān in relation to the knowledge with which he, as a Friend of God, had been inspired. Rūmī’s poetry is particularly appropriate for such a study because of his remarkably frequent use of the Qur’ān, which is especially evident in his *magnum opus*, the *Mathnawī* (“The Couplets”).²

Although the precise origins of the famous couplet presented at the beginning of this chapter, which compares Rūmī's *Mathnawī* with the Qur'ān, have remained elusive, what is known is that the *Mathnawī* has been popularly referred to as "the Qur'ān in Persian" (*Qur'ān dar zabān-i pahlawī*) since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, and possibly since as far back as the fifteenth century. As far as I am aware, no one has questioned or challenged the appropriateness of this description for Rūmī's *magnum opus*. Comparing a book to the Qur'ān is obviously meant as the highest form of praise designed to single out the work as the greatest of its kind, but it is also commonly explained that the *Mathnawī* stands out in the canon of Persian literature for its large number of exegeses of Qur'ānic passages, and even that the *Mathnawī* as a whole is some kind of commentary on the Qur'ān (e.g., Muṭīn 1992: s.v. "Mathnawī"). Such explanations suggest that the content of the *Mathnawī* is closely related to the Qur'ān, with the implication that the Qur'ān is its foundation and its immediate inspiration.

It is necessary to examine systematically the ways in which the Qur'ān is actually used in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* in order to be able to form an opinion about the relationship between the two works, particularly if one wishes to ascertain whether Rūmī's *Mathnawī* is based on the Qur'ānic text as a direct response to it. Citations of the original Arabic text of the Qur'ān constitute only a fraction of the material in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* that overlaps with the holy book in some way, or alludes to it. However, by focusing on actual citations of the Qur'ān it will be possible to make a comparison between Rūmī's *Mathnawī* and other works of the same mystical *mathnawī* (couplets) genre, and thus to reach conclusions that have taken into consideration the historical, intellectual, and literary context of his work (see De Bruijn 1997: 84–111).

The Qur'ān and the *Mathnawī*

Rūmī uses a number of ways to cite the actual words of the Qur'ān, the vast majority of which can be classified into a few broad types. Perhaps the most easily identifiable type of Qur'ān citation is the inclusion of parts of the original Arabic in the course of retelling a Qur'ānic story. Although a Persian poet's own rendering of a Qur'ānic story does not necessarily require the use of the actual wording of the Qur'ān, nonetheless Rūmī very often incorporates key passages from the original within his own Persian verse renditions. For instance, in the retelling of the story of God's appointment of man as vicegerent, he writes:

*He taught the names to Adam at the start (Q 2:31)
Thus knowledge filled our ancestor's pure heart³
(Rūmī 1990: I, v. 1243)*

Like other mystical *mathnawīs*, Rūmī's work consists essentially of narratives and homilies. While there are many retellings of Qur'ānic narratives in the *Mathnawī*, most of its stories are not Qur'ānic in origin (e.g., see Lewis 2000: 288–91). Even those that are have probably been obtained from works of Qur'ānic exegesis or from the "stories of the prophets" genre (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*), which is hardly surprising in view of the scarcity of

extended narratives in the Qur'ān. The majority of the Qur'ānic citations in the *Mathnawī* are embedded in the homilies, and the most celebrated way in which Rūmī uses these citations within his homilies is to corroborate an argument he has presented, often as part of a sequence of comparisons taken from the natural world, everyday life, and literary and folkloric traditions. An example of such a sequence is the following six couplets from the story about the lion who let a wolf and a fox accompany him hunting:

The lion, though embarrassed by this pair,
 Still honored them by letting them come there,
 For such kings feel they're burdened by their troops,
 But he agreed, for blessings come from groups:
 The moon is shamed by stars, in honesty;
 It lets them near through generosity.
 Was not the Prophet told "*Consult them!*" too (Q 3:159)
 Though no one had as good a point of view?
 On scales we pair old iron weights with gold
 Though for a fraction of gold's worth they're sold.
 The body is the spirit's traveling mate;
 The guard dog serves the king at his court's gate.
 (Rūmī 1990: I, vv. 3029–34)

In this typical example, the Qur'ānic comparison is just one member of a sequence of comparable images, all of which are designed to affirm the initial assertion that the lion was doing a favor to the fox and the wolf by letting them accompany him. It is worth noting that it is presented in the middle of the sequence rather than at the start or at the close, and so it is not given precedence over the other images that belong to the sequence. To be precise, it follows immediately after the image of the moon accompanied by stars, an image that was already popular for describing the prophet and his disciples, those whom he had been instructed to consult in the Qur'ānic verse cited in this passage. What that Qur'ānic verse shares with the other images is that, since it originates from the Qur'ān, it would already have been familiar to the intended readers, Rūmī's students, who had a thorough knowledge of the book of Muslim revelation.

Qur'ānic citations are very often used by Rūmī in his homilies not so much as corroborating images of comparison but as alternative ways of expressing sentiments that he could quite easily have conveyed in Persian. Rūmī effectively appropriates many Qur'ānic passages for his own homilies in a way which has parallels to their use in his renditions of Qur'ānic narratives. Like those examples, the citations appropriated in this way are not necessary for the message to be conveyed. For example, Rūmī writes with regard to seeing beyond this world:

Some other clouds and rain far from your view
 Exist in the unseen, and more suns too,
 Just His elite see this manifestation,
 The rest *feel doubt as to a new creation.* (Q 50:15)
 (Rūmī 1990: I, v. 2046–7)

The appropriation of Qur'ānic passages in a text in this way is usually considered immediately with regard to its function as a weighty reinforcement of the author's sentiments. It is very common in sermons, which, in view of Rūmī's own background as a preacher, may help explain why he makes use of this method of citation so frequently. However, it is important not to overlook the fact that the majority of such citations involve word-play, which seems to be the primary reason for their use in the poem. For instance, Rūmī has quoted the Qur'ānic phrase "sowers are pleased" in the following passage, which describes the process through which a wheat grain eventually becomes part of a human, who is then annihilated in God:

If seeds are planted firmly in the ground
Wheat will eventually grow all around,
Then in the mill they grind it to make bread –
Its value soars now with it men are fed.
Next by men's teeth the bread is ground again –
Life, wisdom and intelligence they gain,
And when in love one's life becomes effaced
Sowers are pleased the seed's not gone to waste! (Q 48:29)
(Rūmī 1990: I, vv. 3178–81)

The reason why this particular citation has been used here is because it comes from a passage in the Qur'ān with agricultural imagery, albeit one with a very different message to what Rūmī is describing (see below). The same relatively long verse of the Qur'ān from which this clause has been taken is also the source of the citations in the following passage:

On fleeing death, the hare began to clap
And dance like leaves which in the breeze would flap;
Both branch and leaf like this escape earth's jail –
They lift their heads and with the wind set sail:
When leaves burst forth from branches, they ascend
Up to the tree's most high and furthest end;
Using the tongue of *its initial shoot* (Q 48:29)
God's praise is sung by every leaf and fruit.
The Giver nourished every root of ours
Until our trees *were strong and straight* like towers. (Q 48:29)
(Rūmī 1990: I, vv. 1350–4)

In the original Qur'ānic verse from which all of the last three citations have been taken (Q 48:29), believers are compared with seeds which turn into strong and tall plants thanks to the grace of God, thereby delighting sowers while at the same time enraging the infidels. It is clear that more than for any other reason, these clauses from the same Qur'ānic verse have been incorporated because they happen to have loose connections with certain images employed by Rūmī in this and the previously cited passage: one refers to the cultivation of wheat, the other to a healthy and robust tree. The citation of the Qur'ān in such

instances serves as a display of Rūmī's intimate knowledge of the holy text and virtuosity as a poet, with the aim of delighting the reader and winning his admiration.

The Qur'ān citations included in the homilies of Rūmī's *Mathnawī* which are not used as appropriated speech or as an image of comparison are those embedded in the relatively few instances of Qur'ānic exegesis. While every single use of a citation inevitably structures its own interpretation through the new context in which it is presented, there are passages in the *Mathnawī* labeled as "explanations of meanings of" (e.g., *dar ma'ānī-yi*), or even "Exegesis of" (*tafsīr-i*) specific Qur'ānic verses. The first thing one notices on reading the approximately dozen passages like this is that in most cases they do not actually constitute Qur'ānic exegesis at all, but have been inaccurately identified on the basis of the occurrence of a Qur'ānic verse towards the beginning of the passage or an association between the message of the passage and that of a verse in the Qur'ān (e.g., Rūmī 1990: I, vv. 2582–614). This is part of a general problem with the subheadings provided in the *Mathnawī* and not something that relates exclusively to Qur'ān commentaries. They seem to have been added after the actual text of the poem, and so they often fail to represent accurately the content of the passage which they precede. In consequence, passages that have as their starting point a verse of the Qur'ān are rarer than the impression one might gain by simply looking at the subheadings (see below for an example).

In order to evaluate what these observations may reveal about Rūmī's understanding of the Qur'ān and its relationship to his *Mathnawī*, it is important to compare his use of Qur'ān citations with that of his most well-known predecessors among the authors of Persian mystical *mathnawīs*, namely Ḥakīm Sanā'ī (d. 532/1138) and Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. ca. 616/1220). All works of the Persian mystical *mathnawī* genre, like other forms of religious literature, contain material from the Qur'ān, most obviously in the form of direct citations. Rūmī's *Mathnawī* is therefore not exceptional for containing citations of the original Arabic text of the Qur'ān, albeit with the modifications required by the meter of his Persian poem and the particular couplet's internal rhyme. However, Rūmī's use of Qur'ānic citations remains distinctive in certain aspects. First of all, a comparison with works of this genre that have relatively similar structures to the *Mathnawī* highlights the fact that Rūmī's work includes Qur'ānic citations much more frequently. For instance, while 'Aṭṭār's *Asrār-nāma* contains a citation from the Qur'ān approximately every 250 couplets and Sanā'ī's *Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqīqa* every 150 couplets, Rūmī's *Mathnawī* contains a Qur'ānic citation on average every 30 couplets. Although other uses of the Qur'ān, such as retelling of Qur'ānic stories, and paraphrases of Qur'ānic verses, are not always so easy to identify and classify, one's immediate impression is that in comparison with the other works of the mystic *mathnawī* genre, Rūmī's *Mathnawī* contains more of these examples of Qur'ān usage as well.

The second most striking difference is that when Rūmī cites the Qur'ān, he invariably does so in such a way that its meaning in the context of his *Mathnawī* is transparent, either because its literal meaning makes it obvious or its new context in the *Mathnawī* determines how it is read, as the examples already cited demonstrate. While most of his predecessors often provide a mere couple of key words from a Qur'ānic passage which require reference to the Qur'ān itself for the poem to be understood, Rūmī rarely follows this convention. Although it is fair to say that medieval readers of mystical *mathnawīs*

would be much more familiar with the Qurʾān than a contemporary reader, there may be more significance to this idiosyncrasy than the question of accessibility – not only is Rūmī’s effort to convey his message as clearly as possible to the reader indicated by this tendency to make the *Mathnawī* more self-sufficient, but in order to achieve this a considerable poetic talent is displayed, and, perhaps most significantly of all, this approach avoids implying a distance between the Qurʾān and his self-contained *Mathnawī*.

Another distinctive feature of Rūmī’s use of Qurʾānic citations is his greater willingness to use citations out of their usual context. That is to say, passages are used to convey a message with which they are not usually associated in tradition, as the agricultural citations referred to above amply demonstrate. Even parts of the speech of one character in the Qurʾān are put in the mouth of another character in the *Mathnawī*, as in the case of the prophet Ṣāliḥ, who in the *Mathnawī* says, “Why should I feel bad for the wicked’s sake?” (Rūmī 1990: I, v. 2570), although in the Qurʾān that citation is a remark made by the prophet Shuʿayb (Q 7:93).

The *Mathnawī* in Relation to the Qurʾān

Tradition tells us that Rūmī started to compose the *Mathnawī* after being asked to do so by his deputy Ḥusām al-Dīn Chalabī, who had noticed that his disciples enjoyed reading the mystical *mathnawīs* of Sanāʾī and ʿAṭṭār more than the classical prose works of Ṣūfism. Rūmī does not himself suggest a reason for writing the *Mathnawī* although he does make it clear that Ḥusām al-Dīn had instigated it (Rūmī 1990: I, 1–2). There seems to be no reason to doubt the traditional explanation which refers to the popularity of the works of Sanāʾī and ʿAṭṭār. What it would imply is that Rūmī wrote the *Mathnawī* in order to inspire and instruct his disciples, and moreover he strove to write something they would enjoy reading more than the works of his predecessors. The ways in which Rūmī uses Qurʾān citations support this view, for Rūmī uses them in ways that make the teachings in his *Mathnawī* more immediately accessible as well as more entertaining.

The most famous tradition about the composition of the *Mathnawī* involving Ḥusām al-Dīn is that he wrote down the text as Rūmī recited whenever he became inspired with the poem. Its echoes of the biography of Muḥammad may give reason for skepticism, but there is support for this tradition in the best source of all, the text of the *Mathnawī* itself. Rūmī refers to this process on a number of occasions, including instruction to Ḥusām al-Dīn to get some paper and write down as he recites (“Ḥusām al-Dīn, please fetch a sheet or two/And write about the guide what I tell you”; Rūmī 1990: I, v. 2947) as well as apologies for keeping him up until dawn in this activity (“It’s dawn, O Refuge, who fills dawn with light/Please make Ḥusām forgive it took all night”; Rūmī 1990: I, v. 1817). The structure of the *Mathnawī* also includes many indications that it was produced extemporaneously, albeit with clear evidence that it was edited afterwards (such as by the later insertion of subheadings, as mentioned above), which tradition also acknowledges, and that it follows a loose plan (see Baldick 1981: 125–7).

The composition method described in tradition is interesting in the context of discussing the relationship between the *Mathnawī* and the Qurʾān, as it implies that

Rūmī's work was also divinely inspired rather than a calculated and logically planned poem. In fact, the *Mathnawī* contains a highly significant passage towards the end of its third volume where Rūmī not only affirms this point but also specifically compares his *Mathnawī* with the Qur'ān. This sixty-four-couplet-long passage is divided into six short sections by the subheadings provided (Rūmī 1990: III, vv. 4230–94).

The first section of this passage begins by referring to criticism that has been directed at the *Mathnawī*, mocking the poem as a trivial collection of fables. Rūmī takes solace in the observation by Sanā'ī, referred to here by his well-known title Ḥakīm-i Ghaznawī ("The Sage of Ghazna"), that even the Qur'ān was criticized in this way by ignorant contemporaries of the prophet (Rūmī 1990: III, vv. 4233–4). This discussion of criticism of the *Mathnawī* is resumed in the last of the six sections that make up this sixty-four-couplet-long passage, which includes a reference back to this specific piece of advice from Sanā'ī (Rūmī 1990: III, v. 4294). That final section in fact begins in quite extraordinary fashion with the statement:

Deriding dog! You're barking, sense you lack!
You're mocking the Qur'ān behind its back!
(Rūmī 1990: III, v. 4285)

What Rūmī appears to be asserting here is that "the dog" who rudely criticizes his *Mathnawī* is in effect criticizing the Qur'ān by doing so, and he is thus deriding it behind its back. This is followed by six couplets on the virtues and status of the Qur'ān, as God's eternal speech with spiritual depth to its content, in contrast to the unworthiness of the deriding dog of a critic. Rūmī concludes this passage by returning his focus to himself (or possibly his *Mathnawī*), with the following three couplets:

That Water of Life's fount – look here, behold!
I free the mystic lovers from death's hold.
If your vile greed had not caused such a smell
God would have poured drops on your grave as well!
No, I'll heed the advice from Sanā'ī –
I won't let critics' comments bother me.
(Rūmī 1990: III, vv. 4292–4)

If we take Rūmī as the speaker, which I think is the most credible interpretation, then what these verses are suggesting in this specific context is that the reason why criticizing his *Mathnawī* should be considered to be criticizing the Qur'ān behind its back is because, as different forms of divine revelation, both share common origins. What seems to be clear is that Rūmī is not suggesting that his *Mathnawī* is somehow based on the Qur'ān, but rather that it is the same in origin.

If we look briefly at the four remaining sections of the sixty-four-couplet passage, those which separate these two parts at the beginning and the end, we can find confirmation that this final assertion by Rūmī cannot be dismissed as an isolated bold claim or poetic flight of fancy. This is because the images provided in the intervening sections structure a purposeful argument in preparation for this final assertion.

The first of these intervening sections, Section Two, expands on the criticism that has been directed at the *Mathnawī* on the basis of its outer form alone (see above), by making it clear that what counts is the inner meaning of the Qur'ān and not its form. This is a common Ṣūfī viewpoint, which is presented at length already by Sanā'ī in his *Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqīqat* (Sanā'ī 1998: 113–24, esp. 115–17).

The remaining intervening sections are, significantly, about the status of Friends of God. First of all, in Section Three they are compared with the Qur'ān itself as having both inner and outer aspects; Rūmī makes this point in the form of a refutation of the claim that Friends of God withdraw from society in order to hide. He argues that, just like the Qur'ān, the important aspect of a Friend of God is his inner being and that remains hidden. Therefore, they have no need to hide from people by retreating into seclusion (Rūmī 1990: III, vv. 4253–60). Section Four expands on the theme of the previous section, by comparing Friends of God with the rod of Moses that turned into a snake and the spells of Jesus with which he revived the dead: in their outer appearance you may perceive their form as ordinary like you see a rod or hear words, but inwardly their station is extremely lofty, as vehicles through which God can act (Rūmī 1990: III, vv. 4261–70).

It is the last of these intervening sections, Section Five, which is perhaps the most significant of all because it confronts directly the question of revelation received by Friends of God. This section is presented under the rubric of “*Tafsīr* of the Qur'ānic verse, ‘O hills and birds, repeat his praise!’” (Q 34:10), and it comes as close to an extended commentary on a Qur'ānic verse as one can find in Rūmī's *Mathnawī*. This Qur'ānic verse is understood to represent God's command to the mountains and birds to repeat David's Psalms (*zabūr*), one of the four Muslim “books of revelation,” in harmony with him.

The hill joined Prophet David when he'd sing,
Both minstrels, drunk with deep love for their king:
When the command “Repeat his praise!” first came
The two became one voice, their song the same.
God told him, “Separation you have known,
Cut off from good friends for my sake alone,
A stranger with no close associate,
In whose heart flames of longing have been lit,
You seek companions, minstrels, singers too –
Eternal God presents these hills to you.”
He makes them singers who can sing so well,
He makes these hills fall drunken in a spell,
So you'll know God can make a mere hill sing
And God's Friends, too, experience such a thing –
From God's creation melodies each hears:
Their sound each moment reaches God's Friend's ears,
Unheard by men in the vicinity –
He who has faith in him lives joyfully!
Inside his soul he hears inspired words too
Although those sitting near him have no clue!
(Rūmī 1990: III, vv. 4273–82)

This penultimate section of the passage under scrutiny ties together the previously explored themes concerning prophetic revelation and the lofty inner natures of Friends of God which are kept hidden from view. More specifically, it affirms that divine revelation which prophets receive can also be received by them, since even hills can be inspired by God to utter the Psalms of David. Rūmī explains that most people, since they judge on the basis of outward appearance alone, fail to appreciate this reality. In this context, it is clear that this homily based on exegesis of a verse of the Qur'ān is designed to support Rūmī's subsequent comparison of his *Mathnawī* with the Qur'ān and his condemnation of the critic of his poem: the *Mathnawī* is divine inspiration which he, as a Friend of God, has received from God, even though some may be skeptical of this claim and even mock it on the basis of its form of expression.

Conclusion

In summary, Rūmī's predilections in Qur'ānic citation for the *Mathnawī* seem to serve primarily the purpose of surpassing his predecessors in presenting Ṣūfī teachings in an even more accessible, entertaining, and memorable form than their works, which his students already enjoyed reading. The high frequency of word-play as the principal factor in attracting a citation, as well as the cleverness with which he forms associations with Qur'ānic verses and integrates them, contribute significantly to the fulfillment of this aim and should not be seen as contradicting or compromising it in any way. The fact that the Qur'ān is cited much more frequently by Rūmī than his predecessors can be at least partially explained as being due to his determination to convey his message in as familiar and accessible a form as possible to his readership – it is worth noting that he also stands apart from the others for his provision of so many comparisons from nature and everyday life, often in long sequences illustrating the same point. This is not, however, simply spoon-feeding his readers, but also delighting them with his sensitive imagination and poetic virtuosity. Rūmī demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the Qur'ān, which would have been for his students as familiar as natural phenomena and everyday experience.

At the same time, one can also see in Rūmī's heavy use of Qur'ān citations an indication of his perception of the relationship between the Qur'ān and the *Mathnawī*, namely that they stem from a common source. This is evident in his frequent appropriation of the words of the Qur'ān for his homilies and retellings of stories, his preference to make his use of the Qur'ān self-contained and immediately accessible, eliminating the need for reference outside of the *Mathnawī* itself, and his relatively liberal and carefree transferal of Qur'ānic citations to new, and often very different, contexts. Not only does Rūmī strive to break down the barriers in communication between himself and the reader of much lower spiritual rank and level of education, but he also downplays the distinctions between different forms of divine revelation and their bearers. This is confirmed in Rūmī's direct comments about Friends of God and the relationship between the Qur'ān and his *Mathnawī*.

The comparison with the Qurʾān cited at the beginning of this chapter therefore need not be considered simply as extreme praise or as implying that the *Mathnawī* is a commentary on the Qurʾān. The following couplet about Rūmī, which is often presented alongside that couplet, would seem to correspond to what the Ṣūfī Friend of God himself has specifically conveyed:

How to describe that man of lofty station?
Though not a prophet he brought revelation.⁴

Notes

- 1 This couplet has appeared numerous times attributed to the fifteenth-century poet ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492), but never with a reference to a specific work of his. Reynold Nicholson, in his edition of the *Mathnawī* (1925–40: VII, b2), refers to two more recent works where it is found: ‘Ābidīn Pasha (1887–8) *Tarjama wa sharḥ-i Mathnawī-yi sharīf (Translation and Commentary on the noble Mathnawī)*, 6 vols., Istanbul, on the title-page, and W. Muhammad (1894) *Sharḥ-i Mathnawī (Commentary on the Mathnawī)*, 2 vols., Lucknow, p. 3. I am indebted to Franklin Lewis for the information he shared through the Adabiyat listserve about the edition of Muhammad’s work (originally written in 1728 under the title *Makhzan al-asrār [Treasury of Mysteries]*) which was actually used by Nicholson.
- 2 While this chapter focuses exclusively on Rūmī’s use of the Qurʾān for his *Mathnawī*, his lyrical poems, or *ghazals*, also reveal an extraordinarily high degree of “Qurʾānicity,” as demonstrated in Virani (2002). Although Rūmī is remembered primarily as a Ṣūfī master who conveyed his teachings through poetry, the content of his oral teaching sessions has also been compiled by students, including his comments on the Qurʾān and revelation received by Friends of God (see further Keshavarz 2002).
- 3 The citations from the Qurʾān are presented in italics in the translations presented here. Translations of passages from Book One of the *Mathnawī* are taken from Rūmī (2004), using the same verse numbering as the edition of M. Istīlāmī [= Rūmī 1990], on which it is based.
- 4 This couplet is often found together with the couplet cited at the beginning of the chapter. Concerning its attribution and historical origins, see note 1 above.

Further reading

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CHAPTER 29

Ibn al-ʿArabī

Binyamin Abrahamov

Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (560–638/1165–1240) was one of the most influential mystics of Islam, and has been traditionally referred to as “the Greatest Master” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) from the thirteenth century to the present day. He was born in Murcia in Andalusia and left for the eastern lands of Islam at the age of thirty-seven. He is buried in Damascus. In his writings Ibn al-ʿArabī mixed mysticism, theology, philosophy, hermetic sciences, and law and created original mystical philosophy. Two basic ideas lead Ibn al-ʿArabī in his voluminous writings. The first is unity of existence or being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) according to which God is the only true Existent whose essence cannot be known; however, the cosmos with all its phenomena is the reflection of His attributes. This theory has several consequences, one of which is the equality of all religions. However, based on his second fundamental idea that one should regard every issue from several aspects, the equality of religions holds true for Ibn al-ʿArabī only from the standpoint of God’s self-manifestation, while from the terrestrial perspective differences between religions exist. On a similar basis, God is transcendent from the aspect of rational thought, but from the aspect of God’s self-manifestation, He is immanent. The truth comprises both notions. And God is the First, because everything derives from Him, and He is the last, because everything returns to Him. It is important not to overlook that these two basic principles are interwoven into the writings of “the Greatest Master” (Abrahamov 2015: 1–13).

Ibn al-ʿArabī mentions three commentaries of the Qurʾān which he wrote, one of which appears in the margins of Mahmoud Ghorab’s book (Ghorab 1989: 3–5). But his great commentary is not extant (Chodkiewicz 1993: 77f., 134, n. 37). However, interpretations of Qurʾānic verses and passages occupy a great part of his writings; hence, for

the present chapter, I prefer to provide my examples from his other works, rather than his commentaries, assuming that his interpretations in the commentaries do not differ from those which appear in his other works.

It is common knowledge that Qur’ān exegesis reflects the ideas of the various currents of thought in Islam. Ṣūfism is no exception to this rule. The Ṣūfis have laid down three general principles of their interpretation of the holy text, which reflects their mystical worldview:

- The Qur’ān contains many layers of meanings.
- The human being is capable of discovering these layers.
- The interpretation of the Qur’ān is an endless task.

Ibn al-‘Arabī is commonly associated with the use of indirect allusion (*ishāra*) for his interpretation of the Qur’ān and the ways in which he uses the plain meaning of the Qur’ānic text are rarely appreciated in consequence. To illustrate what is meant by his use of *ishāra* one can refer to the fifty-fourth chapter of his *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* entitled “On the knowledge of allusions (*ishārāt*)” (1999: I, 420–4). Ibn al-‘Arabī states that allusion is what the people of God, the gnostics, see in themselves, and that it is God who teaches them this knowledge. They named this kind of knowledge *ishāra* and not *tafsīr* (commentary), out of fear they might be accused of disbelief by the formal scholars (*ahl al-rusūm*). For an example of *ishāra*, Ibn al-‘Arabī cites Qur’ān 55:29: “Every day He is (occupied) with an affair” (*kulla yawmin huwa fī sha’nin*) to show that God creates anew the diverse phenomena in the world every instant. Thus, “every day” serves as an allusion to every instant and “affair” is an allusion to infinite different phenomena.¹

This chapter aims specifically to demonstrate that “the Greatest Master” uses not only the system of allusions (*ishārāt*)² in his interpretations of the Qur’ān, but also other systems based on the plain meaning in order to convey his ideas as effectively as possible, and to classify these other systems.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the plain meaning (*ẓāhir*) of the text is in fact very sophisticated.³ The devices he employs are based on: (1) simple logical arguments; (2) the first meanings of the words; (3) play with the etymology of the words; (4) paraphrasing of the verses; and (5) creating a whole picture through adding verses from other *sūras*. In employing all these systems of interpretation, Ibn al-‘Arabī succeeds in showing that metaphysics is the true meaning of the Qur’ān (Nettler 2003: 14).

Using Simple Logical Arguments

I do not accept the following statement by Kristin Sands: “Unlike al-Ghazālī, Ibn ‘Arabī rejects rational interpretation (*ta’wīl ‘aqlī*) outright” (2005: 39). Although revelation occupies the first place in gaining knowledge, in my view Ibn al-‘Arabī considers the intellect as an important device to prove some basic principles of religion such as God’s existence and unity (Abrahamov 2007: 9–22). He has even been shown to regard reason to be a balance through which everything should be weighed, including the

Qur'ān (Chittick 1989: 199). Consequently, logical considerations support Ibn al-'Arabī's understanding of the Qur'ān.

In support of my viewpoint, let us bring an example of a famous verse which serves traditionally as corroboration for the refutation of anthropomorphism. Q 42:11 reads: "There is nothing like Him: He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing" (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay'un wa-huwa al-samī' al-baṣīr*).⁴ According to Ibn al-'Arabī, the first part of the verse designates God's transcendence (*tanzīh*), denying of Him any resemblance to created beings, while the second points to His being similar to created beings with respect to hearing and seeing, although not in the same degree (Ibn al-'Arabī 2002: I, 70). Hence, God is both transcendent and immanent, a central principle in Ibn al-'Arabī's thought. Moreover, even in the first part of the verse, our author finds the two traits of God, because the Qur'ān has *ka-mithlihi*, since this strictly means that God has "a like" (*mithl*) and nothing is similar to this like (Ibn al-'Arabī 2002: II, 36, Afifi's commentary). Thus, the same sentence can be interpreted to mean both transcendence and immanence.

There is no doubt that this interpretation is based on a simple rational understanding of the verse supported by linguistic considerations. On the one hand the verse denies any similarity between the creation and God, and on the other produces such similarity by ascribing human senses, hearing and seeing, to God. Ibn al-'Arabī remains here within the confines of the external interpretation (*zāhir*) of the Qur'ān without resorting to allusions or to any other esoteric device.

A close scrutiny of Q 30:23 supports Ibn al-'Arabī's way of looking at life in this world. The Qur'ān says: "Among His signs is your sleep, by night and by day..." (*wamin āyātihi manāmukum bi'l-layli wa'l-nahār*).⁵ From the fact that wakefulness is missing in the text and that sleep is by night and by day, Ibn al-'Arabī in his *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* concludes that human beings are asleep all their life and when they die they wake up. As corroboration for this idea, he cites the following tradition: "People are asleep, but when they die, they wake up" (*al-nās niyāmun, fa-idhā mātū intabahu*). He also strengthens his understanding of the Qur'ānic verse by pointing out that the particle *bi* is missing in *wa'l-nahār* so night and day are unambiguously combined (Ibn al-'Arabī 1999: I, 314).

A similar connection between a tradition and a Qur'ānic verse appears in the chapter on Noah in the *Fuṣūṣ*. According to the famous tradition, whose origin goes back to a Delphic maxim, "whoever knows his soul (his self), knows his Lord" (*man 'arafa nafsahu, 'arafa rabbahu*). Now, Q 41:53 reads: "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their souls (themselves), until it becomes evident to them that He is the Real (or that this is the truth)." For Ibn al-'Arabī "signs on the horizons" stand for the external phenomena, while "signs in the souls" mean the essence of the human being (Ibn al-'Arabī 2002: 69). The contemplation of both kinds of signs brings about the knowledge of the existence of the Real as a spirit in the human being. The weakness in this understanding is the fact that what becomes clear to the human being is not necessarily the idea of the Real, for *al-ḥaqq* may be interpreted to mean also the truth. However, the verse creates a connection between contemplating the soul and gaining knowledge.

In Ibn al-'Arabī's thought God's mercy plays a significant role. This importance is proved through his theory that the creation of human beings from non-existence is

through God’s name “the Merciful” (*al-rahīmān*), which is evil, to existence, which is good. Thus, the Merciful’s act is prior to any other act. For this reason the Prophet said: “God’s mercy precedes His wrath” (*sabaqat raḥmat allāh ghaḍābahu*; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1999: III, 236; Chittick 1989: 290f.). Elsewhere in the *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* our author corroborates the idea conveyed in this tradition by adducing Q 40:7: “Our Lord, you embrace everything in mercy and knowledge.” Since mercy encompasses all things, wrath is included in it, hence there is no pure wrath which is not mixed with mercy (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1999: III, 254). However, mercy may appear in a pure manner as the act of creation.

Exploiting the First Meanings of the Words

Ibn al-‘Arabī sometimes exploits the first meaning of a word in order to fulfill his aim. This phenomenon is clearly shown in chapter three of the *Fuṣūṣ* on Noah in which Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the verses in *sūra* 71 (Nūḥ) is totally different from the traditional commentaries, where the people in Noah’s epoch are identified as being unbelievers (*kāfir*) and sinners (*fājir*). However, basing himself on the first meanings of the words usually translated with the aforementioned definitions, Ibn al-‘Arabī reverses the negative into a positive sense in the course of producing a mystical interpretation. For instance, Q 71:26–7 reads: “Noah said: ‘My Lord, do not leave one of the unbelievers (*kāfirīn*) on earth. If you leave them, they will mislead your servants, and will beget none but sinner (*fājir*) and unbeliever.’” The first meaning of the verb *kafara* is “he concealed,” on the basis of which *al-kāfirīn* is taken by Ibn al-‘Arabī to mean those who conceal the mystery of the cosmos. In a slightly different manner the word *fājir*, which is usually translated in the Qur’ānic context as a sinner, is now turned into the one who makes the concealed manifest (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002: 73f.; Abrahamov 2015: 42). The first meaning of the verb *fajara* is “he opened, or broke” and our author understands it as “he caused something to be revealed,” which actually comes closer to that first meaning than “sinner.” Therefore, through the exploitation of the first meaning of the key words in the Qur’ānic text itself, Ibn al-‘Arabī interprets these verses as relating not to unbelief and sin, but to concealing and revealing the mystery of the cosmos.

Word-Play with the Etymology of Words

In the same chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* one finds the following passage where Ibn al-‘Arabī uses another method of Qur’ānic interpretation, which teaches us that he was happy to change the root of a verb in order to make it fit his thought:

Owing to his wisdom (literally: in his wisdom) Noah said to his people: “He will send down abundant rain from the sky for you” (Q 71:11), meaning (kinds) of intellectual knowledge and of reflection, “and He will give you wealth (*amwāl*)” (Q 71:12), by which He will cause you to incline toward Him (*yamīlu bi-kum ilayhi*). (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002: 71; Abrahamov 2015: 39)

Here Ibn al-ʿArabī chooses to play with the similar roots *m-w-l* of *amwāl* and *m-y-l* of *yamīlu*, although the meanings of these two words are different, in order to replace a reward of material wealth with one of inclination towards God. It is worth noting that the first part of the verse here is interpreted according to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s well-documented system of allusion (*ishāra*), for “abundant rain” turns into intellectual knowledge.

Q 71:25 is interpreted in a similar manner. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes:

“Because of their steps of going beyond” (*khaṭīʿātihim*, literally: their sins, Q 71:25) which caused them to go beyond and hence they were drowned in the seas of the knowledge of God, which means perplexity. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2002: 73; Abrahamov 2015: 41–2)

The author plays here with the root of *khaṭīʿātihim*, *kh-ṭ-ʿ*, and interprets it as if it has the similar root *kh-ṭ-w* in the first form (*khaṭā*), meaning “to walk, to go”; with the particle “*bi*” it means “to cause to go.” This enables him to change the meaning from drowning through transgression with sin to entry into perplexity.

Paraphrasing of Verses

In the fourth method of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s commentary for using the plain meaning of the text of the Qurʾān he makes paraphrases of the Qurʾānic text in a way that enables him to allude to the content of the original verse. Q 20:114 reads: “My Lord, increase my knowledge” (*rabbī, zidnī ʿilman*). In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s paraphrase of this verse the word knowledge is replaced by perplexity to show that increase in knowledge brings about increase in perplexity regarding the knowledge of God.

He says: “Increase my perplexity concerning You” (*zidnī fika taḥayyuran*). (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2002: 73, l. 2; Abrahamov 2015: 41)

This method should be differentiated from using phrases of the Qurʾān in the text which have only stylistic similarity to the Qurʾānic phrase. For example, the author cites a part of Q 7:95: “While they were unaware” (*wa-hum lā yashʿurūn*) (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2002: 51, l. 5; Abrahamov 2015: 19).

Creating a Whole Picture through Adding Verses from Other Sūras

In the course of commenting on *sūrat nūḥ* (Q 71), Ibn al-ʿArabī incorporates verses from other *sūras* into his commentary and thus makes a whole picture produced from different sources (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2002: 72f.; Abrahamov 2015: 40–1). Among the verses mentioned are Q 12:108; 19:85; 13:33; 39:3; 22:34; 38:47; 42:14; 2:20). This is not the usual way of interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān (*tafsīr al-Qurʾān biʾl-qurʾān*) through which words or phrases in one place are interpreted by adducing words or phrases from another, but rather it involves gathering parts of Qurʾānic verses to complete an idea found in a certain *sūra*. In this way, the Qurʾān is not a collection of separate chapters, but instead becomes a living body in which every part supports every other part.

Conclusion

I believe that in addition to the way of allusion and the five devices mentioned above (simple logical arguments; the first meanings of words; word-play with the etymology of the words; paraphrasing of the verses; and creating a whole picture through adding verses from other *sūras*), Ibn al-‘Arabī has further ways to deal with the Qur’ān beyond the typology I have presented here.⁶ In his sophisticated system of dealing with the Qur’ānic text, he embodies Abū Madyan’s (d. 1126) maxim: “the *murīd* (the Sufi disciple) does not become *murīd* until he finds in the Qur’ān everything he wills (*kull mā yurīd*).” To this maxim Ibn al-‘Arabī adds the following observation: “Every speech which does not have such a generality (*umūm*) is not the Qur’ān” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1999: V, 137). It seems that as a result of the present maxim, our author favors al-Junayd’s dictum regarding the relationship between the overflow which stems from the Godhead and the structure of the human body. Asked about gnosis and the gnostic (*ma‘rifa*, *‘arif*), al-Junayd said: “The color of the water is the color of its vessel” (*lawn al-mā’ lawn inā’ihi*). By this dictum he means to express the idea that God’s bestowal is identical with regard to each individual; however, it changes according to the place in which it inheres (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1999: I, 430). Still another use of this saying occurs in chapter 334 of the *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* in the context of the relationship between the Qur’ān and the believers. The Qur’ān represents the water and the heart of the believer the vessel. The holy text is renewed each time it is recited according to the receiver’s heart, which is called here the throne of the heart (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1999: V, 189). Thus each individual may interpret the Qur’ān in a different way. This freedom of interpretation does not exist exclusively in Islamic mysticism and has its equivalents in other religions. For instance, R. Mordechai from Lachovitz (d. 1810) was the founder of the Hasidic order of Slonim. Once he tried to explain a verse in the Torah and his listeners, who were against Hasidism, laughed at his interpretation, which did not overcome the obstacles in the verse. Thereupon he said: “What do they want? Is my aim to overcome obstacles in the verse? I just want to overcome obstacles in my heart.” So this Hasidic rabbi needed the verse to solve his own problem and he found what he willed (*mā yurīd*).

All in all, in his exegesis of the Qur’ān, Ibn al-‘Arabī follows the three principles of exegesis that we mentioned above: the Qur’ān accordingly possesses many and in fact infinite strata of interpretations, owing to the various individuals who interpret it, and Ibn al-‘Arabī regards himself as capable of its interpretation.

Notes

- 1 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Kitāb ayyām al-sha’n* (in Ibn al-‘Arabī 1948: I, 16–18 of this epistle); Morris (1987: 640, n. 63); Chittick (1989: Index of Koranic Verses). In like manner, God’s two hands (Q 38:75) symbolize each pair of His attributes, such as beauty (*jamāl*) and glory (*jalāl*; Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002: I, 54). In this book milk is a symbol of knowledge (ibid.: 86, 100). The box in which Moses was thrown into the water is his humanity, while the water stands for knowledge (ibid.: 198).

- 2 For a discussion of this term see Goldziher (1955: 201–85); Paul Nwyia, “Ishāra,” *EI2* (2004); Keeler (2006: 49, 55, 57, 85, 96, n. 2); Böwering (1980: 141); Sands (2005: 35–7).
- 3 The plain meaning and the allusion which apply to a Qur’ānic verse do not contradict each other; they just provide two points of view regarding the verse. Hence both are true (Nettler 1996: 54, n. 3). In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, “the consideration of only the literal meaning (*al-mafhūm*) as evidence (*dalāla*) is weak, for it cannot reliably be true in every case” (Ghorab 1993: 200). Furthermore, he regards his interpretations of the Qur’ānic verses as *ishārāt* (Chodkiewicz 1993: 35). Notwithstanding, a significant part of his teachings is based, as we shall see, on the plain meaning of the text.
- 4 The punctuation in Abdel Haleem’s translation (2004) may convey the following meaning: God is not similar to any created being, because He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.
- 5 On the role of signs in the Qur’ān, see Abrahamov (2006).
- 6 It should be noted that contrary to al-Ghazālī, who belittles the importance of exoteric interpretation in gaining esoteric understanding of the Qur’ān (Heer 1999: 257), Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently uses the plain meaning of the text to show the inner metaphysical content of the Qur’ān.

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CHAPTER 30

Twelver Shī'ī *Ta'wīl*

Diana Steigerwald

Our cause is a secret (*sirr*) within a secret, a secret of something which remains hidden, a secret which may only be disclosed by another secret; a secret upon a secret which is supported by a secret. (Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, quoted in Corbin 1993: 37)

Shī'ism is a branch (*firqa*) of Islam in which one finds some of the most esoteric interpretations and some of the most dynamic discussions on the nature of the Qur'ān. Shī'ī interpretations of the Qur'ān concern mainly issues of authority where the concept of the imamate (*imāma*) is paramount. The issues surrounding the Shī'ī Qur'ān are multiple; they cover much more than just the history of the text and its variations. Other major subjects include exegesis (*ta'wīl*) of the text, the distinction between exoteric (*zāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) meanings. In this chapter, I will show how the Twelver Shī'ites (Ithnā 'ashariyya) have interpreted the Qur'ān and developed their spiritual exegesis. This research provides a comprehensive account of the history while not pretending to be exhaustive.

Origin of Shī'ī Islam

Many verses of the Qur'ān contained statements about the notion of *imāma* which are interpreted differently by Sunnīs and Shī'ites. Here are a few verses regularly quoted by Shī'ites: "And We made them leaders (*a'imma*, singular *imām*), guiding [men] by Our command (*amr*), and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers and to practice regular charity; And they constantly served Us [and Us only]"

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(Q 21:73). The word “leaders” in this verse may refer to both prophets and Shī‘ī Imāms. “Verily We shall give life to the death, and We record that which they sent before and that which they leave. Behind, and of all things have We taken account in a ‘manifest Imām’ (*imām mubīn*)” (Q 36:12).

For the Shī‘ites, the *ahl al-bayt* (“people of the house”) includes the prophet’s daughter Fāṭima, his son-in-law ‘Alī, and his grandsons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. “And Allāh only wishes to remove all abomination from you people of the house (*ahl al-bayt*) and to make you pure and spotless” (Q 33:33). “They said: ‘Dost thou wonder at Allāh’s decree? The grace of Allāh and His blessings on you, O people of the house (*ahl al-bayt*)! For He is indeed worthy of all praise full of all glory!’” (Q 11:73). “That this is indeed a Qur’ān most honorable in a book well-guarded, which none touch but those who are purified (*muṭahharūn*)” (Q 56:77–9). “O you who believe! Obey God, and obey the apostle, and those charged with authority (*ūlū’l-amr*) among you” (Q 4:59). From these above verses, the Shī‘ites deduced that the *muṭahharūn* designates the Shī‘ī Imāms who are consequently impeccable (*ma‘ṣūm*) and inspired, always following the divine command. “Whoever submits His whole self to God, and is doer of good, has grasped indeed the most trustworthy hand-hold (*al-urwa al-wuthqā*)” (Q 31:22; see also 2:256). According to the Shī‘ites, the *urwa al-wuthqā* refers to the “rope of *imāma*” which is continuous till the day of resurrection and remains a permanent link between the spiritual and material worlds. Also in *sūrat al-nūr* (Q 24:35–6), the blessed olive tree is said to symbolize the Imām.

Shī‘ites deduce from the following Qur’ānic verse that the *imāma* is a divine institution and that the Imām must be from the seed of Abraham: “And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled. He said: ‘I will make thee an *imām* to the nations.’ He said: ‘And also [*imāms*] from my offspring!’” (Q 2:124). Based on this verse, Shī‘ites maintain that the divinely appointed Imām, who is an example for all mankind, must necessarily himself be impeccable (*ma‘ṣūm*).

The origin of Shī‘ī Islām goes back to the issue of succession following Muḥammad’s death. There are some indications that Muḥammad may have intended for his cousin and son-in-law, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, to succeed him. For the Shī‘ites, Muḥammad explicitly designated (*naṣṣ jalī*) ‘Alī as his successor by God’s command at a place called Ghadīr Khumm. Some traditions accepted as canonical by both Sunnīs and Shī‘ites give a unique status to ‘Alī in Muḥammad’s eyes. For example this *ḥadīth*, which is accepted by Shī‘ites, is also found in the Sunnī *ḥadīth* collection of Ibn Ḥanbal (Ibn Ḥanbal n.d.: I, 84, 118–19, 152, 331; IV, 281, 327, 370) and expressed by Muḥammad al-Bāqir al-Majlīsī (d. 1111/1699):

When the ceremonies of the pilgrimage were completed, the prophet, attended by ‘Alī and the Muslims, left Mecca for Medina. On reaching Ghadīr Khumm, [Muḥammad] halted, although that place had never before been a halting place for caravans. The reason for the halt was that verses of the Qur’ān had come upon him, commanding him to establish ‘Alī in the caliphate....The message that came from the Most High was this: “O apostle, declare all that has been sent down to thee from thy Lord. No part of it is to be withheld. God will protect you against men, for he does not guide the unbelievers” (Q 5:71)....When the crowd had all gathered, Muḥammad walked up on to the platform of saddles and called ‘Alī to

stand at his right. After a prayer of thanks he spoke to the people, informing them that he had been forewarned of his death, and saying, "I have been summoned to the gate of God, and I shall soon depart to God, to be concealed from you, and bidding farewell to this world. I am leaving you the book of God, and if you follow this you will not go astray. And I am leaving you also the 'members of the household' (*ahl al-bayt*), who are not to be separated from the book of God until they meet me at the drinking fountain of Kawthar." He then called out, "Am I not more precious to you than your own lives?" They said "Yes." Then he took 'Alī's hands and raised them so high that he showed the whites of his armpits, and said, "Whoever has me as his master (*mawlā*) has 'Alī as his master. Be friend to his friends, O Lord, and be an enemy to his enemies. Help those who assist him and frustrate those who oppose him." (al-Majlisī 1909: III, 339; Donaldson 1933: 5)

A verse from the Qur'ān was revealed on the same occasion: "This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion" (Q 5:3). The event of Ghadr Khumm is not denied by Sunnīs but interpreted differently by them. For the Sunnīs, Muḥammad wanted only to honor 'Alī. They understood the term *mawlā* in the sense of "friend" whereas the Shī'ites recognized 'Alī as their master; the spiritual authority of 'Alī was transferred afterward to his direct descendants, the rightful guides (*imāms*). The Shī'ites hold that 'Alī and his descendants have a divine right to the caliphate (*khalīfa*). 'Alī had received a special mandate from the prophet. Muḥammad is spoken of as having left behind him two momentous things (*thalaqayn*): the Qur'ān and the people of his household, both of which are needed in order to remain on the right path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*). The Qur'ān is described as the "greater weight" (*al-thaqal al-akbar*) whereas the Imāms are called the "lesser weight" (*al-thaqal al-asghar*) (Ayoub 1988: 180).

The successor of the prophet is the inheritor (*waṣī*) of his esoteric knowledge and the interpreter, *par excellence*, of the Qur'ān. Since Muḥammad was the last prophet who closed the prophetic cycle, the Shī'ites believe that humanity still needs spiritual guidance: the cycle of *imāma* must succeed to the cycle of prophecy. The notion of *imāma* is thus a cardinal principle of Shī'ī faith since it is only through the Imām that true knowledge can be obtained. The prophet received the revelation (*tanzīl*) and established the religious law (*sharī'a*) while 'Alī, the repository of the prophet's knowledge, provided its spiritual exegesis (*ta'wīl*). Thus the *imāma*, closely tied to 'Alī's spiritual mission, is according to Shī'ī understanding a rational necessity and an obligatory grace.

For Shī'ites, 'Alī's mission is seen as the hidden and secret aspect of prophecy. This underlying idea is based on 'Alī's declaration:

I am the Sign of the All-Powerful. I am the Gnosis of Mysteries. I am the Companion of the Radiance of the Divine Majesty. I am the First and the Last, the Manifest (*Zāhir*) and the Hidden (*Bāṭin*). I am the Face of God. I am the Mirror of God, the Supreme Pen, the *Tabula secreta*. I am he who in the Gospel is called Elijah. I am he who is in possession of the Secret of God's Messenger. (Corbin 1993: 49)

There are also many other sayings attributed to 'Alī which emphasized the necessity of an interpreter of the Qur'ān.

The Imām as successor of the prophet and spiritual leader of the community is as important as the prophet. The Shī'ites believe that God appointed prophets to guide mankind; likewise He also appointed Imāms to continue the guidance. When God selects a prophet or Imām, He chooses an individual who is impeccable – perfect on all accounts. For the Shī'ites, ordinary human beings with their own limited capacity and imperfection cannot “elect” the prophet’s successor. The prophets were not elected by the people, but by God. Only Muḥammad, who possessed blessed knowledge, can appoint his successor. Similarly, only ‘Alī, who has divine inspiration (*ta’yīd*), can know who should succeed him. Even though ‘Alī eventually took his place as the fourth caliph, the Shī'ites believe he was really the first true caliph who was followed by a succession of Imāms, appointed by *naṣṣ* (“designation”) by the preceding Imām. ‘Alī became the successor of the prophet by divine command as expressed through Muḥammad’s will.

The concept of the Imām implies that the cycle of prophecy is succeeded by the cycle of the *walāya*, the institution of “the friends of God.” The text of the Qur’ān in itself is not sufficient because it contains hidden meanings and apparent contradictions. “The knowledge of such a book cannot be grasped fully by the norms of ordinary philosophy: the text must be ‘taken back’ (*ta’wīl*) to the level on which its true meaning is manifest” (Corbin 1993: 45). The *bāṭin* (esoteric) and *zāhir* (exoteric) meanings of the Qur’ān have also been identified with the concept of *ta’wīl* (spiritual exegesis) and *tanzīl* (descent of revelation) respectively. Thus *ta’wīl* is the act of uncovering the *bāṭin* from the *zāhir*. Such a task is not within the competence of an ordinary human being. Its discernment requires someone who is an inspired spiritual heir possessing full knowledge of revelation. He is the *ḥujjat Allāh*, the “proof of God,” and the Imām the spiritual guide who can update the interpretation of the Qur’ān in accord with his own time. Henry Corbin observes: “Hence, the *ta’wīl* is pre-eminently the hermeneutics of symbols....*Ta’wīl* presupposes the superimposition of worlds and interworlds, as the correlative basis for a plurality of meanings in the same text” (Corbin 1977: 53–4). Thus, each layer of meanings corresponds to a respective spiritual level in the hierarchy.

The Shī'ites believe in many layers of meanings hidden in the Qur’ān which they try to uncover through *ta’wīl*. The word *ta’wīl* in Arabic means to go back to the first, primary meaning. In the *tafsīr* literature of Sunnī Islam the words *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl* are used almost synonymously. But, for the Shī'ites, both have distinct meanings. *Tafsīr* refers to the manifest meaning of the Qur’ān; *ta’wīl* designates its hidden meaning. *Tafsīr* remained a term of more limited denotation while *ta’wīl*, based on intellect (*‘aql*), connoted hermeneutical principles that sought to uncover deeper meanings.

The main principle of Shī’ī exegesis is based on the fact that “the Qur’ān has an outer dimension (*zāhir*) and an inner dimension (*bāṭin*); its inner dimension has yet another dimension, up to seven inner dimensions” (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1987: 28; Ayoub 1988: 187). Thus each verse of the Qur’ān is subject to several levels of interpretation. As Imām Ja‘far al-Šādiq explains, “the beginning of a verse may be sent down concerning one thing, its middle concerning another, and its end concerning yet another thing. [The Qur’ān] is constituted by speech which is closely connected and executed in various ways” (al-‘Ayyāshī n.d.: I, 11; Ayoub 1988: 187).

To the spiritual hierarchy in Shī'ism correspond different degrees of knowledge. Hence, Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq is reported to have said:

The book of God contains four things: the announced expression (*'ibāra*); the allusion (*ishāra*); the hidden meaning related to the suprasensible worlds (*latā'if*); and the spiritual truths (*ḥaqā'iq*). The literary expression is for the common people (*'awāmm*); the allusion is for the elite (*khawāṣṣ*); the hidden meaning is for the Friends of God (*awliyā'*); and the spiritual truths are for the Prophets (*anbiyā'*). (Nasr 1994: 59)

Ja'far al-Ṣādiq explains that the Imām is the Interpreter *par excellence* of all scriptures: "God made our authority (*walāya*) the pole (*qutb*) of the Qur'ān and the pole of all scriptures. Around it the clear (*muhkam*) verses of the Qur'ān revolve; through it scriptures were elucidated and through it faith becomes manifest" (al-'Ayyāshī n.d.: I, 5; Ayoub 1988: 181). Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq is said to have declared: "We are the people of a household among whom God continues to send one who knows His book from its beginning to its ends. We possess such knowledge of God's sanctions and prohibitions as would oblige to keep its secret, not telling anyone about it" (al-'Ayyāshī n.d.: I, 16; Ayoub 1988: 187).

Ḥaydar Āmulī, a Twelver Shī'ite of the eighth/fourteenth century, uses the symbol of almond to illustrate different levels in the spiritual hierarchy. The legislative prophecy (*risāla*) is symbolized by the nutshell, the inner prophecy (*nubuwwa*) by the almond, and the institution of God's friends (*walāya*) by the almond's oil. This division in three parts corresponds to two homologous series: *sharī'a* ("religious law"), *ṭarīqa* ("mystical path"), *ḥaqīqa* ("spiritual realization"), and the second: *ẓāhir* ("exoteric meaning"), *bāṭin* ("esoteric meaning"), and *bāṭin al-bāṭin* ("inner meaning of the esoteric meaning"). Thus the knowledge of the deepest meanings of the Qur'ān is the prerogative of God's friends, that is, the Imāms (Āmulī 1969: 386).

The Qur'ān is a divine revelation, but its interpretation is human, hence there have been different interpretations. The differences in interpretation began shortly after the death of Muḥammad. Different companions of the prophet began to differ from each other, and with the passage of time these differences also deepened in their scope. Also, many groups came into existence in the early period of Islam and every group tried to justify its doctrine by interpreting the Qur'ān. The formation and doctrinal differences have been dealt with in various books such as *Kitāb Firaq al-Shī'a* ("Book of Shī'ī Groups") of al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī (d. ca. 310/923), *Al-Farq bayn al-firaq* ("The Schism between Muslim Groups") of 'Abd al-Qāhir b. Ṭāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), and others. Each of these groups tried to interpret various Qur'ānic verses in their own way. The Shī'ites also subsequently divided into a number of subgroups, the main division being between Ithnā 'ashariyya (Twelver Shī'ites) and Ismā'īlīs.

The Sunnīs differ greatly from the Shī'ites in their understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ān. This is why the Sunnī corpus of traditions (*ḥadīth*) developed separately from that of Shī'ites. The Sunnīs and Shī'ites differ on the interpretation of this verse:

He it is who has sent down to thee the book. In it are verses basic or fundamental [of established meaning] (*muhkamāt*); they are the "foundation of the book" (*umm al-kitāb*); others are allegorical (*mutashābihāt*). But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part

thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meaning (*ta'wīl*) except God. And those who are “firmly grounded in knowledge” (*al-rāsikhūn fī l-'ilm*) say: “We believe in the book; the whole of it is from our Lord.” (Q 3:7)

For Sunnīs, God alone knows the *ta'wīl*. The Shī'ites read the verse differently by not reading the text with a period after “except God” and believe that the knowledge of *ta'wīl* is possessed by God and *al-rāsikhūn fī l-'ilm*, that is, the Shī'ī Imāms. Hence it is clear from the above verse that there are many passages from the Qur'ān which are subject to different interpretations.

Early Debates on the Qur'ān

This section gives a short survey on the origins of Sunnī–Shī'ī controversies on the integrity of the Qur'ānic text. The development of these debates in the first Islamic centuries represents an interesting example of how ideas evolved in the early period through disputes, as well as contacts between various schools of thought (Modarressi 1993). The major issue in these debates was whether the 'Uthmānic text comprehended all the Qur'ānic verses revealed to Muḥammad, or whether there had been further verses which are now missing from the text.

At the end of the reign of the third caliph 'Uthmān (d. 35/656), it became evident to some members of the community that there were too many variations in the memorized texts. In 12/634, many of the memorizers (*qurrā'*) of the Qur'ān lost their lives in a battle against a rival community at Yamāma in Arabia (al-Ya'qūbī 1960: II, 15; al-Ṭabarī 1960: III, 296; Ibn Kathīr 1966: VII, 439). Fearing that the complete Qur'ān would be lost, the first caliph Abū Bakr asked 'Umar and Zayd b. Thābit to record any verse or part of the revelation that at least two witnesses testified at the entrance of the mosque in Medina. All of the material gathered was recorded on sheets of paper (al-Ya'qūbī 1960: II, 135; al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 185, 207, 208), but was not yet compiled as a volume. These sheets were transmitted from Abū Bakr and 'Umar to 'Umar's daughter Ḥafṣa, who gave them to 'Uthmān, who had them put together in the form of a volume. 'Uthmān sent several copies of his compilation to different parts of the Muslim world and he then ordered that any other collections or verses of the Qur'ān found anywhere else be burned (al-Bukhārī 1862–1908: III, 393–4; al-Tirmidhī 1964: IV, 347–8; al-Bayhaqī 1985: VII, 150–1).

According to many early transmitted reports, 'Alī wrote his own compilation of the Qur'ān (Ibn Sa'd 1904–15: II, 338; al-Ya'qūbī 1960: II, 135; Ibn al-Nadīm 1971: 30; al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 204, 248; al-Kulaynī 1957–9: VIII, 18) and presented it to the companions; but they rejected it, so he took it back home (Sulaym n.d.: 72, 108; al-Kulaynī 1957–9: II, 633; al-Ya'qūbī 1960: II, 135–6). These reports also pointed out that there were substantial differences between the various compilations of the Qur'ān. The only copy of the complete Qur'ān with verses proclaiming the exalted status of 'Alī and the future Imāms was in 'Alī's possession. 'Alī, known for his vast knowledge of the Qur'ān

(Ibn Sa'd 1904–15: I, 204), preserved this original copy and passed it on to his successors. In his codex of the Qur'ān he had reportedly indicated the verses which were abrogated, and those which abrogated them (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 204).

The Shī'ī community learned early on that to express their beliefs openly was fruitless. This only caused their community to be persecuted. Hence they started to practice *taqiyya* (religious dissimulation), which allows a Shī'ite to deny his or her faith under dangerous conditions. In doing so, believers retain their allegiance to Shī'ism while presenting an orthodox face to the oppressors. This applies to Qur'ānic interpretations as well. The Shī'ites were practicing *taqiyya* to prevent revealing esoteric interpretations to Sunnī Muslims who do not accept them. Thus *taqiyya* also means keeping the *bāṭin* secret.

The 'Uthmānic Qur'ān did not put an end to any future variations in reading. Since the science of Arabic orthography was still primitive, variations remained possible. The 'Uthmānic text contained limited vowel markings or none at all, and the shapes of several consonants were similar, both of which allowed for a great variety of readings. These readings could lead to different interpretations. For example, the Arabic word *'alī* could be taken either to be a simple adjective signifying “exalted,” or to refer to the person of 'Alī and his special role as successor of the prophet. Later in the fourth/tenth century, a limited number of variations were selected and canonized.

Unfortunately, it seems that what the variant texts were and how much they varied will most probably never be discovered. This ambiguity gave space to the most heated debate about the Shī'ī Qur'ān, both by Muslim scholars and by Western scholars. In May 1842, Garcin de Tassy edited in the *Journal Asiatique* the text and translation of an unknown chapter of the Qur'ān entitled “*Sūra* of the two lights” (*sūrat al-nūrayn*), the “two lights” referring respectively to Muḥammad and 'Alī. Most scholars who commented on this *sūra* were uncertain of its origins (Eliash 1966: 125; 1969: 17). However this concept of “two lights” is developed by Shī'ites who distinguished between the “light of the *imāma*” and the “light of prophecy.”

St. Clair Tisdall discovered a manuscript of the Qur'ān in India in 1912 that appeared to be about three hundred years old (Tisdall 1913: 228). In this manuscript he found a previously unknown *sūra* that was not part of the 'Uthmānic Qur'ān, as well as a few verses which were unique to this manuscript. The “*sūra* of divine friendship” (*sūrat al-walāya*) contained seven verses which mentioned 'Alī as *walī* (“friend”) of God as well as the spiritual heir of the prophet, which Tisdall translated along with a few “new” verses in *The Moslem World* in 1913. Tisdall could not prove the authenticity of any of these additional chapters, and nor could von Grunebaum (1961: 80), who examined them later.

Meir M. Bar-Asher gave a complete overview of the topic in an article published in 1993 entitled “Variant Readings and Additions of the Imāmī-Shī'ī to the Qur'ān.” Arthur Jeffrey had already catalogued many of the variant readings in his *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān* (1937). Thus Bar-Asher decided to catalogue all of those that Jeffrey did not list and then selected only those variants that were relevant to Shī'ism (Bar-Asher 1993: 80). He examined the Shī'ī variant readings of the Qur'ān, the nature of the variations, and their difference from the 'Uthmānic

compilation. Bar-Asher divided the variants into four types. First are minor alterations of words by exchanging or adding letters or vowel markings. This is the most common type of variant. Second is the exchange of one word for another, such as *imām* for *umma* (community). Third is the rearrangement of word order; this type of variant is the one most commonly accepted by Shīʿites. The Shīʿites of the first four Muslim centuries believed that ʿUthmān excised significant segments from the original Qurʾān and thus the fourth type of variant concerns some words that were omitted intentionally by ʿUthmān, such as references to ʿAlī and the *imāma* (Bar-Asher 1993: 47). Today, the majority of Twelver Shīʿites affirm that the ʿUthmānic edition preserves the entire text, but in the wrong order. This, to them, explains why the narrative of the Qurʾān does not always flow smoothly.

There are two primary types of Shīʿī exegeses. First, in an analytic approach, the exegete deals with the Qurʾān verse by verse, in accordance with their compiled sequence. The exegete analyzes the text referring to literal meanings, traditions, or other verses in the Qurʾān that have some meaning in common with the verse under study while taking into consideration the context in which the text occurs. Analytic exegesis was the most popular approach used for many centuries by the traditionalists. In fact, *ḥadīth* remained the prime basis of exegesis for a long period of time. These traditions of the prophet and the Imāms were often replies to questions asked by the general populace. Second, a thematic approach seeks to study the Qurʾān by taking up one particular theme within the various theological, social, and cosmological contexts. It studies and discusses, for example, the doctrine of *tawḥīd* (“unicity of God”), the concept of prophethood, or the notion of creation in the Qurʾān. Both types of exegeses are complementary and may be combined. The thematic approach prevailed in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), while the analytic approach was common in Qurʾānic studies.

Some of the most sophisticated esoteric theosophy was developed during the *imāna* of Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. ca. 114/714) and Jaʿfar al-Šādiq (d. 148/765) (see Nwyia 1968). It was also during this time that esoteric theories about the Qurʾān became manifest, and thus so did the assertions that the ʿUthmānic Qurʾān was incomplete. The revealed text alone is a “silent Qurʾān,” in contrast with the Imāms, who were the “speaking Qurʾān” (Ayoub 1988: 184f.). It was during this time that a split occurred between Twelver Shīʿites and Ismāʿīlīs. There are many differences between Twelver Shīʿism and Ismāʿīlism even if they share a common ground; these differences were minute at the beginning but they became deeper when the twelfth Imām went into occultation (*ghayba*) in the ninth century. The Twelver theology changed gradually in the absence of the direct guidance of the Imām and developed justifications for the concept of *ghayba*.

Early Exegetes

The Ithnā ʿashariyya and the Ismāʿīlīs maintain that Jaʿfar al-Šādiq appointed by designation (*naṣṣ*) his eldest son Ismāʿīl as successor. But according to the Twelver Shīʿī understanding, Ismāʿīl died prematurely, so Jaʿfar designated another son,

Mūsā al-Kāẓim, as Imām. In Twelver Shī'ism, the chain of *imāma* stopped with the seclusion of the twelfth Imām, who will reappear at the end of time. There are mainly two theological schools within Twelver Shī'ism: the Akhbārī and the Uṣūlī. The Uṣūlī school gives more power to the *mujtahid* ("the one who exerts *ijtihād*, independent judgment"), who is freer to exercise his individual reasoning. The Akhbārī school interprets the Qur'ān mainly through reliance upon traditions ascribed to the Imāms. In this respect, the sacred text is seen through the views and charisma of the prophet and the Imāms (Lawson 1993: 173–210).

The Qur'ān is maintained in a well-guarded tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), which has a power on earth described as being beyond what a hard mountain can bear. It is a source of healing and blessing for the people. According to 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. ca. 307/920), the author of a Shī'ī *tafsīr*, the Imām, manifestation of God's light, shares these eternal qualities with the Qur'ān because he was with it before the creation. The Imām is seen as the purpose of creation; God created all creatures in order to worship Him. The only way to worship God is through the Imām; God has appointed him, because he is the only one who can give the right Qur'ānic interpretation. He is the source of guidance *par excellence* and can transfer the necessary knowledge to increase the faith of his disciples (al-Qummī 1386: I, 18–19; Ayoub 1988: 180).

Following the occultation of the twelfth Imām, everything changed. The Twelver Shī'ī community no longer had access to the direct guidance of their Imām, and, aside from the *abwāb* (agents of the "hidden Imām") and the *'ulamā'* (religious scholars), their only source of guidance was the 'Uthmānic Qur'ān (Momen 1985: 189 f.). As has been mentioned, the Twelver Shī'ites believe that the canonical recension is partly incomplete and disorganized. Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq is reported to have said: "Had the Qur'ān been read as it was sent down, you should have found us named in it" (al-'Ayyāshī n.d.: I, 13; Ayoub 1988: 183). This saying may allude to the *ahl al-bayt* ('Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn) who were alive during the lifetime of the prophet. But since the Twelfth Imām went into occultation, the Shī'ites seem to have relied further on the principle of *taqiyya* by accepting outwardly the 'Uthmānic Qur'ān. It seems unlikely that Shī'ites could ever fully accept the Sunnī Qur'ān, for their very affiliation with Shī'ism requires that they hold that Muḥammad had explicitly designated 'Alī to succeed him. The Sunnī traditions and Qur'ān (according to Sunnī interpretation) do not include such proofs. Bar-Asher explains this ambivalence of Shī'ites who remain convinced of their Shī'ī faith but, because of the constant fear of persecution, decided to adopt the Sunnī Qur'ān (Bar-Asher 1993: 46).

The Imām is still among the community even while being hidden and not interacting with the world; his presence supports the very existence of the world (Amir-Moezzi 1994: 125). He and he alone is the sole being who fully understands the Qur'ān. When the twelfth Imām entered the state of occultation, the Shī'ī community lost its contact not just with the Imām but with the true Qur'ān as well. They are waiting for the Mahdī to bring the original text of the Qur'ān back when he manifests himself at the end of time.

The Shī'ī commentators in their study of a Qur'ānic verse viewed the explanations given by Muḥammad as indications of the meaning of the verse; they did not accept the companions as infallible transmitters of the sayings of Muḥammad. The Shī'ites only

recognized as valid an unbroken chain of narration from the prophet through his direct descendants. Accordingly, they restricted themselves as to the use of traditions transmitted by the prophet and the Imāms. This has given rise to the following subgroups.

The first group comprises those who have learned these traditions from the prophet and from the Imāms. Zurāra b. A'yūn (second/eighth century), Muḥammad b. Muslim b. Riyya al-Ṭā'ifi (second/eighth century), Ma'rūf b. Kharbūdh (second/eighth century), and Jarīr (second/eighth century) who were companions of the Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq were part of the first group. Their original *tafsīr* works have not come down to us but their traditions were preserved by the next group.

The second group is composed of the first compilers of the commentaries such as Furāt b. Ibrāhīm al-Kūfī (third/ninth century), Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī, Muḥammad al-'Ayyāshī (d. ca. 319/932), 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. ca. 307/919–20), and Muḥammad al-Nu'mānī (d. 360/971), all of whom lived between the second and fourth centuries after *hijra*. They avoided any kind of *ijtihād* (independent judgment). During their lifetime, the Imāms were available for questioning on matters of commentary (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1987: 50–1). Furāt was an authority on Shī'ī traditions during the *imāna* of Imām Muḥammad al-Jawād. Al-'Ayyāshī was a Sunnī scholar who accepted the Ja'farī legal school. Al-Qummī transmitted traditions which came from his father, who heard them from the Imāms' disciples. Al-Nu'mānī was a student of al-Kulaynī (d. ca. 329/940–1), who compiled a canonical collection of Shī'ī traditions entitled *al-Kāfi fi 'ilm al-dīn* ("The Sufficient in the Science of Religion"). His work on *tafsīr* is reproduced in the *Bihār al-anwār* ("Oceans of Lights") of Muḥammad al-Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1111/1699). This second group simply compiled traditions without giving their own comments (Ayoub 1988: 184–5).

Medieval Exegetes

The third group encompasses masters of various sciences such as al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 405/1015), who wrote a commentary concerned with Qur'ānic language; his brother al-Sayyid al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044); Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), a student of al-Murtaḍā who composed a commentary focusing on metaphysics; and his disciple, 'Alī'l-Faḍl al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1153), who, in his *Majma' al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* ("Collection of Elucidation in the Exegesis of the Qur'ān"), covers different fields of language, grammar, Qur'ānic recitation, traditions, death, and afterlife. We may notice a shift in Twelver Shī'ī thought among members of this group, who started to reject earlier Shī'ī claims about the incompleteness of the 'Uthmānic Qur'ān. Other important commentators belonging to this group are: Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 1050/1640), who wrote philosophic works, the gnostic commentary of al-Maybudī al-Kūnābādī, and 'Abd 'Alī al-Ḥuwayzī (d. 1112/1700), whose commentary is called *Nūr al-thaqalayn* ("Light of the Two Momentous Things"). Ḥāshim al-Baḥrānī (d. 1107/1695) composed the commentary *al-Burhān* ("The Proof") and Muḥsin al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680) compiled the work known as *Tafsīr al-Sāfi* ("Exegesis of the Sincere Friend") (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1987: 51; Ayoub 1988: 185).

Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) was born in 'Ukbarā in Iraq. The Būyids were in power and there was a blossoming of Shī'ī scholarship in Baghdad where Shaykh al-Mufīd went to study. Shaykh al-Mufīd explains in *Kitāb al-irshād* ("The Book of Guidance") that God refers to 'Alī using the term *walī* (friend) in Q 5:55 (al-Mufīd 1981: 3). According to a *ḥadīth*, the prophet said: "You ('Alī) are in the same position with respect to me as Aaron was to Moses except that there is no prophet after me"; therefore, Shaykh al-Mufīd applies to 'Alī all the Qur'ānic verses (see, e.g., Q 20:29–36) describing the function of Aaron. 'Alī and Aaron have a share in prophecy and their role is to help the prophet deliver the message and to deputize on behalf of the prophet (al-Mufīd 1981: 3).

Then al-Mufīd enumerates numerous traditions showing the outstanding merit of 'Alī over everybody in religious knowledge.

The prophet said: "I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate. Therefore whoever wants knowledge should learn it from 'Alī." When the pledge of allegiance was made to the commander of the faithful ['Alī] for the caliphate, he went out to the mosque wearing the turban and cloak of the apostle of God....Then he said: "Question me before you lose me. Question me, for I have the knowledge of those who came earlier and those who will come later. If the cushion [on which a judge sits] was folded for me [to sit on], I could give judgments to the people of the Torah by their Torah, to the people of the Gospels by their Gospels, to the people of their Psalms by their Psalms and to the people of the *Furqān* [i.e., Qur'ān] by their *Furqān*, so that each one of these books will be fulfilled and will declare, 'O Lord, indeed 'Alī has given judgment according to Your decree.' By God, I know the Qur'ān and its interpretation [better] than anyone who claims knowledge of it. If it were not for one verse in the book of God, most High, I would be able to inform you of what will be until the day of resurrection." Then he said: "Question me before you lose me, for by Him who split the seed and brought the soul into being, if you questioned me about [it] verse by verse, I would tell you of the time of its revelation and why it was revealed, I would inform of the abrogating [verse] and the abrogated, of the specific and general, the clearly defined and the ambiguous, of the Meccan and the Medinan. By God, there is not a party who can lead astray or guide until the day of resurrection, without me knowing its leader, the one who drives it forward and the one who urges it on." (al-Mufīd 1981: 21–2)

Al-Mufīd concludes that there are numerous reports similar to this one but that he chooses to report only a few examples.

'Allāma al-Hillī (d. 726/1325), known as Ibn al-Muṭahhar, was a Shī'ī theologian who lived during the Īl-khānid dynasty, the descendants of Hūlāgū. In one of his books, *al-Bāb al-ḥādī 'ashar* ("A Treatise on the Principles of Shī'ī Theology"), he explains that all the arguments proving that prophecy is necessary are relevant for the *imāma*. Since the *imāma* is the successor (*khilāfa*) of prophecy and stands in its place, the Imām must be impeccable; if that were not so, the command to do what is approved by Allāh and the prohibition against what is disapproved would cease to be obligatory, and that is impossible. Since he is the guardian of the law, the Imām must be impeccable to preserve the law from addition or loss. The Imām must be impeccable because he cannot be unjust, since God said, "My covenant embraced not the evildoers" (Q 3:112) and "O you who

believe! Obey God, and obey the apostles, and those charged with authority among you” (Q 4:59). He argues that “those charged with authority among you” could be either impeccable or not; however, the second possibility must be false, since God cannot ordain obedience to one for whom error is possible. Hence the first option is true. Further, it must refer to ‘Alī and his descendants since impeccability was not claimed by anyone else (al-Hillī 1958: 64–5, 68, 76).

Modern Exegetes

The modern contemporary trend in *tafsīr* may be illustrated in the thought of Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1321/1904–1402/1981) and of al-Sayyid Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Khū’ī (1317/1899–1413/1992), who wrote *Bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (“Elucidation in the Exegesis of the Qur’ān”). Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī was one of the great masters of Qur’ānic commentary, Islamic philosophy, and gnosis (*irfān*). His thought gives a good illustration of the attitudes toward the Qur’ān adopted by many Twelver Shī’ites presently. He is the author of a Qur’ānic commentary entitled *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (“The Balance in the Exegesis of the Qur’ān”), which consists of some twenty-seven volumes written in Arabic. This immense commentary is based on the principle of using one part of the Qur’ān to elucidate other parts.

Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī is also the author of another work written in Persian, entitled *Qur’ān dar Islām*, translated into English under the title of *The Qur’ān in Islām*, which gives an introduction to the study of the Qur’ān as traditionally understood by the mainstream of Shī’ī thought. He also discusses the Shī’ī attitude towards the Qur’ān in his book *Shī’ite Islām*. Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī affirms that the Qur’ān “never uses enigmatic or puzzling methods of exposition and always expounds any subject in a language suitable for that subject” (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1975: 99). According to him, the Qur’ān is perfect and shows man the way to realize his goal on earth in the most complete terms. It gives a way of correctly viewing the universe and a correct manner of behavior (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1987: 26). The Qur’ān is endowed with an eternal quality, which proves that its validity is not restricted to a particular time or place; since it is perfect, it does not need anything else to be completed. This attitude toward the Qur’ān is not basically different from the Sunnī position.

Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī refers also to Q 3:7 already quoted at the beginning of this chapter. For him, the *muḥkamāt* verses of the Qur’ān are explicit, clear, unambiguous, and safe from misinterpretation. The *mutashābihāt* verses are implicit and allegorical. It is the duty of all sincere Muslims to believe in and act according to the *muḥkamāt* verses. It is also their duty to believe in the *mutashābihāt* verses but they must abstain from acting upon them, because it is only those who are not sincere Muslims who follow the *mutashābihāt* verses, fabricating interpretations to deceive common people. The Shī’ites also maintain that the believer must seek knowledge of the *mutashābihāt* verses from God, the prophet, and the Imāms. There is no verse whose meaning is totally obscure since the Qur’ān describes itself as a light and a source of guidance for humanity. Thus, there are no verses in the Qur’ān which fail to reveal their meaning (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1987: 33–4). According to

al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, all verses of the Qur'ān may reveal their true meaning to ordinary human beings. It is clear from the different maxims of the Imāms that there is always a way to discover the real meaning of the implicit verses. Each verse, even the ones with implicit meaning, can be explained by reference to other verses. Hence the real meaning of the allegorical verses can be found in relation to the explicit verses. 'Alī is reported to have said that one part of the Qur'ān bears witness to another and clarifies the other (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1987: 36–7).

Conclusion

Shī'ī interpretations of the Qur'ān concern mainly issues of authority within which the concept of *imāma* is paramount. For the Shī'ites, Muḥammad explicitly designated 'Alī as his successor at Ghadīr Khumm by God's command. The prophet left behind him two momentous things: the Qur'ān and the people of his household; both are needed in order to remain on the right path. Since Muḥammad was the last prophet who closed the prophetic cycle, the Shī'ites believe that humanity still needs spiritual guidance: the cycle of *imāma* must succeed to the cycle of prophecy. *Imāma* is a cardinal principle of Shī'ī faith since it is only through the Imām that true knowledge can be obtained. The Imām, the manifestation of God's light, shares these eternal qualities with the Qur'ān because he was with it before the creation. The Imām encapsulates the purpose of creation and it is only through him that it is possible to worship God. Muḥammad received the revelation and established the religious law while 'Alī, the repository of the prophet's knowledge, provided its spiritual exegesis. The main principle of Shī'ī exegesis is based on the fact that the Qur'ān has an outer dimension and an inner dimension which has up to seven inner dimensions.

Today the majority of Twelver Shī'ites affirm that the 'Uthmānic edition preserves the entire text in the Qur'ān, but in the wrong order in some places. The Shī'ites of the first four *hijrī* centuries maintained that 'Uthmān excised significant verses from the original Qur'ān. Following the occultation of the Twelfth Imām, the Twelver Shī'ī community no longer had access to the direct guidance of their Imām, and aside from the agents of the hidden Imām and the '*ulamā'*, their only source of guidance was the 'Uthmānic Qur'ān. Since the Twelfth Imām went into occultation, the Shī'ites seem to have relied on the principle of *taqiyya* to a significant extent by accepting outwardly the 'Uthmānic Qur'ān.

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CHAPTER 31

Ismāʿīlī Taʾwīl

Diana Steigerwald

This chapter, surveying how the Ismāʿīlīs have interpreted the Qurʾān and developed their spiritual exegesis, provides an account of the relevant history while not pretending to be exhaustive. Even when the Ismāʿīlīs lived in difficult times, they were still the champions of *bāṭin* (the “inner meaning” of revelation) because they, especially the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs, remain attached to the necessity of a “speaking” (*nāṭiq*) Qurʾān, accessible in this physical world and whose main function is to update the interpretation of the Qurʾān for the present time. The Ismāʿīlīs maintained the Shīʿī doctrine of *imāma*, which acts as the foundation of the Ismāʿīlī theosophy; it is based on the necessity of a divinely guided and sinless (*maʿṣūm*) Imām. After the death of Muḥammad, the Imām acts on his behalf to guide the believers in their spiritual and material lives. The Imām possesses knowledge (*ʿilm*) and a perfect understanding of the Qurʾān as well as the religious law (*sharʿa*).

In the second/eighth century, the Shīʿī communities, under the leadership of Imām Jaʿfar al-Šādiq, acquired notoriety. The Ismāʿīlīs separated from the rest of the Twelver Shīʿites on the death of Imām Jaʿfar al-Šādiq in 147/765, but the political success of the Ismāʿīlīs culminated in the establishment of the Fāṭimid dynasty in North Africa in 297/909. There was a dispute over the succession of Imām al-Mustanṣir biʿllāh, after his death in 487/1094. Mustanṣir designated Nizār, his elder son, to succeed him. But al-Afḍal, commander-in-chief of the army, at the death of al-Mustanṣir biʿllāh, placed a younger son of Mustanṣir, al-Mustaʿlī, who was married to al-Afḍal’s sister, on the throne. Hence emerged the Nizārī and the Mustaʿlī branches of the Ismāʿīlīs. Al-Mustaʿlī was recognized as Imām by the Ismāʿīlīs of Egypt, Yemen, and Western India. The Ismāʿīlīs of Persia and Iraq, under the leadership of Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ (d. 518/1124), acknowledged al-Mustanṣir biʿllāh’s eldest son, Nizār (d. 489/1096), as their next Imām.

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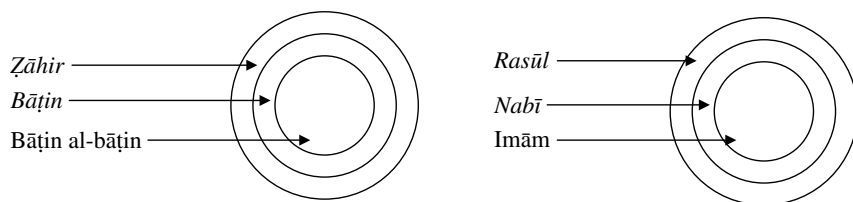


Figure 31.1 Ismā'īlī theory of interpretation.

The Ismā'īlīs attempted to raise human consciousness to a higher plane; they were not at all the irreligious libertines their adversaries often represented them as. On the contrary, they were dedicated to a life of service and self-improvement. Their goal was wholly spiritual. Ismā'īlism is neither a philosophy nor a theology, but it is a theosophy or “divine wisdom.” The Ismā'īlīs built one of the most remarkable speculative systems on the basis of the Qur'ān, the science of the cosmos, and neo-Platonism. These three elements were interwoven to give a rich and coherent worldview. The Ismā'īlīs sought to understand the cosmos and their place within it.

Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* shares common ground with Ṣūfism. We need to distinguish in Ismā'īlism two types of *ta'wīl*. First, the supreme *ta'wīl*, elucidating the *bāṭin* – the interior or hidden meaning – of the *bāṭin* meaning of the text, is the prerogative of the Imām only. Second, there is a lower level of *ta'wīl* of elucidating the *bāṭin* which is exercised by an individual member of the Ismā'īlī mission (*da'wa*), who will give an interpretation of the Qur'ān corresponding to his own spiritual level. This second type of *ta'wīl* resembles Ṣūfī exegesis. The method is called *kashf*, an “unveiling” to the heart of the interpreter, and is dependent upon the master (*murshid*), the grace of God, and the spiritual capacity of the interpreter (see Figure 31.1).

For Marshall Hodgson (1974: I, 394–5, 400), Ṣūfī exegesis is less allegorical or symbolic than that found in Ismā'īlism and focused more on the personal experience that words inspire. By searching the inner meaning of the Qur'ānic words, the Ṣūfīs wanted to revive the spiritual states from which the words originated. Their exegesis was accompanied with isolation and meditation. For the Ṣūfīs, the objective is to seek nearness to God through the Qur'ān. Although Ismā'īlīs are also mystics and practice meditation, their method of approaching the Qur'ān seems to be more intellectual than the Ṣūfīs. The Ismā'īlīs seek to understand the Qur'ān by penetrating to the roots, and then retrieving and disclosing that which is interior or hidden. This search engages both the intellect and the spirit (*rūh*) in order to discover the truths (*ḥaqā'iq*). Their Qur'ānic exegesis is based on the word, letter order, and on calculating the numerical value of letters. Each verse of the Qur'ān has a surface meaning and several hidden meanings.

In every cycle of seven days (in the time frame of the celestial realm) an Adam is created and the chain of prophethood ends with the last prophet, who is in turn succeeded by Imāms. The cycle of *imāma* ends with the *Qā'im al-qiyāma* (“Lord of the resurrection”) who will reveal the *ta'wīl* of previous revelations. The six main speaking-prophets (*nuṭāqā'*) were accompanied respectively by an Imām (Table 31.1). Thus, according to this theory, these cycles will continue until there is no more matter in this universe and all matter is transformed into *laṭāfa* (“gracefulness,” “kindness”).

Table 31.1 The chain of prophethood

Days	Prophets	Imāms	
1	Adam	Seth	<i>tanzīl</i>
2	Noah	Shem	<i>ta'wīl</i>
3	Abraham	Ishmael	<i>tanzīl/ta'wīl</i>
4	Moses	Aaron	<i>tanzīl</i>
5	Jesus	Simon Peter	<i>ta'wīl</i>
6	Muḥammad	ʿAlī	<i>tanzīl/ta'wīl</i>
7	–	<i>Qā'im al-qiyāma</i>	<i>ta'wīl al-ta'wīl</i>

Early Exegetes

The pre-Fātimid period runs from Imām Ismā'īl (ca. 147/764 or later) to Imām Raḍī 'l-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh (d. ca. 268/882). It was a period of *satr* (“concealment”) in which the Imāms were *mastūr* (“hidden” from the majority) since their life was endangered. This concept of *mastūr* must be differentiated from the Twelver Shīʿī idea of occultation (*ghayba*), which means that the Mahdī is occulted until the day of resurrection. It was in this complex situation that the *Treatises* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ (the “Brethren of Purity”) were written. These works are of great importance in Ismāʿīlī literature and were composed by authors who had a vast knowledge of Hellenic literature and of the various sciences existing during that time. These treatises do not, however, present a systematic exposition of *ta'wīl*.

The Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ divide people in three classes. First, the common people have to follow the religious law (*sharīʿa*) to improve their character. The second class improves their comprehension of religion by studying the Qurʾān and the *sunna*, the spoken and acted example of Muḥammad. This class is gifted with discursive reasoning and is capable of *ijtihād* (independent judgment) in order to arrive at solid proofs. This category is subdivided into many spiritual levels. The third class is composed of the elite who know the inner (*bāṭin*) and hidden (*khaṭī*) meanings of the Qurʾān. They are the purified ones (*muṭahharūn*), that is, the prophets and the Imāms, who know the mysteries of religion (*Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* 1376/1957: III, 504, 511–12).

The Brethren explain that verses in the Qurʾān referring to the throne, to the sight and speech of God, should not be interpreted literally. Only God and the experts of Qurʾānic interpretation can properly interpret these verses (*Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* 1376/1957: III, 344–5). They also attempted to speculate on the numerical value of the Arabic letters (*kāf*, *hā*, *yā*, *ʿayn*, and *ṣād*) appearing at the beginning of some Qurʾānic chapters in order to finally conclude that their meaning should remain a secret reserved to a few select servants of God (*Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* 1376/1957: III, 378–83). They also give a spiritual exegesis of the encounter of Moses, described as the Lord of the religious law, with al-Khiḍr, the master of secrets (*Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* 1376/1957: III, 509). Concerning the nature of the Qurʾān, the Brethren consider the actual sounds,

words, and letters as *makhlūqa* (“created”), while the ideas or meanings in the mind of God are uncreated (*Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’* 1376/1957: III, 517).

Fāṭimid Exegetes

The Fāṭimid period started with Imām ‘Ubayd Allāh (d. 322/934) and ended with Imām al-‘Āqid (d. 567/1171). An Ismā‘īlī state was established in Ifriqiyya (Tunisia) and later in northern Africa. The University of al-Azhar was founded around 360/970. The Ismā‘īlī theosophy was gradually structured by al-Nasafī (d. 331/942), Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933–4), Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (fourth/tenth century), al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān (d. 363/974), and others. Later Ismā‘īlism received an official form through the labors of Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 412/1024) and Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. after 465/1072). Fāṭimid theosophy is characterized by the preservation of the equilibrium between the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*.

Some important books of *ta’wīl* are the *Kitāb al-shawāhid wa ’l-bayān* (“The Book of Evidences and the Declaration”) and *Kitāb al-kashf* (“The Book of Unveiling”) ascribed to Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. 302/914), *Kitāb a’lām al-nubuwwa* (“The Book of Signs of Prophecy”) of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Ta’wīl al-da‘ā’im* (“The Spiritual Exegesis of the Pillars”) and *Asās al-ta’wīl* (“The Foundation of Spiritual Exegesis”) of al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *Kashf al-mahjūb* (“Unveiling of the Hidden”) and *Kitāb al-yanābī’* (“The Book of Sources”) of Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. ca. 390/1000), *Rāḥat al-‘aql* (“The Tranquility of Intellect”) of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, and *Al-Majālis* (“The Assemblies”) of Mu‘ayyad fi ’l-dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1077).

Manṣūr al-Yaman (Ibn Ḥawshab), a famous missionary (*dā‘ī*) responsible for the spread of Ismā‘īlism in Yemen, gives a spiritual exegesis of a verse from *sūra Yā-Sīn* (Q 36:40): “It is not permitted to the sun to catch up the moon, nor can the night outstrip the day: each [just] swims along in [its own] orbit [according to law].” The Imām, in the Qur’ān, is symbolized by the sun while the *ḥujja* (proof of the Imām), a spiritual dignitary, is represented by the moon. The Imām usually does not overtake his *ḥujja* unless he establishes the hidden mission (*da‘wat al-bāṭin*). That night cannot outstrip the day signifies that the hidden mission does not overtake the outward mission (*da‘wat al-ẓāhir*) (Engineer 1980: 56; Engineer cites his own personal manuscript of *Kitāb al-shawāhid wa ’l-bayān*).

Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, a renowned jurist who worked for the first four Fāṭimid Caliphs, in *Asās al-ta’wīl*, quotes a saying attributed to Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq: “We can speak about a word in seven different ways.” When the astounded questioner responded, “Seven!” the Imām retorted: “Yes, even seventy. If you ask us more we can increase it even more.” Al-Nu‘mān explains that there are many possible interpretations corresponding to different spiritual rank. The number of interpretations increases as you ascend the spiritual hierarchy (al-Nu‘mān 1960: 27; Poonawala 1988b: 221).

Al-Nu‘mān describes in his *Ta’wīl al-da‘ā’im* the hidden meanings of the seven *da‘ā’im* (pillars) (Engineer 1980: 55; Engineer cites his own personal manuscript of the *Ta’wīl al-da‘ā’im*, 54) – see Table 31.2.

Table 31.2 Hidden meaning of the seven pillars

	Spiritual guides	Pillars of faith
1	Adam	<i>walāya</i> (love, devotion)
2	Noah	<i>ṭahāra</i> (purity)
3	Abraham	<i>ṣalāt</i> (prayer)
4	Moses	<i>zakāt</i> (almsgiving)
5	Jesus	<i>ṣawm</i> (fasting)
6	Muḥammad	<i>ḥajj</i> (pilgrimage)
7	Imām	<i>jihād</i> (exertion in the way of God)

The very first pillar for the Ismā'īlīs is *walāya* (love, devotion) to the family of the prophet (*ahl al-bayt*). For al-Nu'mān, each pillar represents a prophet from Adam to Muḥammad. Adam was the first prophet whose *walāya* was made obligatory for the angels who prostrate before him (Q 2:34). Adam is the first of the prophets and his *walāya* symbolizes the *walāya* of all the succeeding prophets and Imāms. In Ismā'īlī theosophy, the second pillar, *ṭahāra* ("purity"), is associated with the second prophet Noah. Noah was sent for the purification of mankind. Whatever sins were committed after Adam's time, Noah came to purify. The floodwater during the time of Noah symbolizes purity, as water is needed to purify the body from dirt. The spiritual meaning (*bāṭin*) of water is knowledge of ultimate reality, *'ilm*, which is necessary for spiritual purity and ascent.

The third pillar is prayer, *ṣalāt*, and al-Nu'mān relates it to the prophet Abraham who constructed the house of Allāh in Mecca, the direction of prayers, *qibla*, for the Muslims. Moses represents *zakāt* ("almsgiving") since he is the first prophet who is said to have asked Pharaoh to purify (*tazakka*) himself (see Q 79:18). The root of *zakāt* in Arabic is related to purification; it is through *zakāt* that one purifies one's wealth by giving a part away to the poor. *Ṣawm* ("fasting") is related to the prophet Jesus. It was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who said to her people (Q 19:26), "I have vowed a fast to (God) Most Gracious, and this day will I enter into no talk with any human being." Hence the inner meaning of *ṣawm* is to keep silent about the *bāṭin*.

Since the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) is the last of those things made obligatory by God, it is related to the last prophet Muḥammad who first required Muslims to perform the *ḥajj* to Mecca. The last of the pillars of Islām, *jihād* ("exertion in the way of God"), is related to the seventh Imām in the chain of Imāms. The seventh Imām, also called *nāṭiq* ("speaker"), reveals part of the esoteric meanings of the Qur'ān through his effort (*jihād*) to purify religion. The *Qā'im al-qiyāma*, the last of the seven Imāms, will reveal the esoteric truth in its entirety and through him the Muslim community (*umma*) will be unified. Thus Muḥammad excels over all other prophets by his function in the sense that two pillars of Islām – *ḥajj* and *jihād* – have been related to him and his descendants.

Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī, a *dā‘ī* of Khurāsān, in his *Kitāb al-maqālīd* (“The Book of Keys”) explains clearly the difference between *tanzīl* (“plain revelation”) and *ta’wīl*:

Tanzīl is similar to the raw materials, while the *ta’wīl* resembles the manufactured goods. For example, nature produces various types of wood, but unless a craftsman works on them and gives them a specific shape, such as a door, a chest or a chair, the wood is not worth more than fuel [to be consumed] by the fire. The wood’s worth and benefit become manifest only after it receives the craftsman’s craftsmanship.... Similarly, *tanzīl* consists of putting things together in words. Beneath those words lie the treasured meanings. It is the practitioner of the *ta’wīl* who extracts the intended meaning from each word and puts everything in its proper place. This is, then, the difference between the *tanzīl* and the *ta’wīl* (Al-Sijistānī, 52nd *iqḥid*, translated by Poonawala 1988b: 206)

The function of *ta’wīl* comes always after *tanzīl*. The prophet’s role is to bring *tanzīl* and the *sharī‘a* to the people whereas the function of the successor (*waṣī*) is to reveal gradually the hidden meanings through *ta’wīl*. Only the *waṣī* has the knowledge of each thing’s proper place in the hierarchy, which he reveals by the act of *ta’wīl*.

Al-Sijistānī explains that *ta’wīl* is necessary for two categories of Qur’ānic verses: one, verses with physical objects such as heaven, earth, and mountains, and two, the allegorical verses (*mutashābihāt*). In chapter 12 of *Kitāb al-iftikhār* (“The Book of Pride”), al-Sijistānī gives some examples such as Q 21:105: “Before this We wrote in the Psalms, after the message (given to Moses): ‘My servants, the righteous, should inherit the earth.’” This, he suggests, should not be interpreted in the literal sense since it is always the tyrants who take the land. The earth on which vegetation grows is a source of nourishment for all creatures; therefore its inner meaning is the nourishment of the soul (i.e., spiritual knowledge). In another passage, Q 21:104, “The day that We roll up the heaven like a scroll rolled up with the writings,” the “heaven” signifies the *sharī‘a*, which will be abrogated on the judgment day (Poonawala 1988b: 210, 214–15).

Concerning the interpretation of the Qur’ān, al-Kirmānī wrote in his treatise on the necessity of *Imāma* that many verses can be interpreted differently by different groups. For example the verse (38:75): “O Iblīs, what prevents you from bowing down to what I created with my own hand (*bi-yadī*)?” The Mu‘tazilites confirm their doctrine by saying that “my own hand” means strength and power. Another group gives a different meaning as benefit and benevolence. Those who favor the theory of predestination (*al-mujbira*) interpret the “hand” to mean a part of the body to strengthen their own argument. By leaving freedom for each interpreter to interpret the Qur’ān according to his intention, it is equivalent to cutting a piece of cloth and letting the tailor do what he wants. Someone can turn this cloth into a shirt because he needs it. Another prefers to make pants, while another design a jacket (al-Kirmānī 2007: 72).

If multiple interpretations of a sentence are possible and reasonable, real wisdom requires that there be someone in the community that teaches the proper interpretation so as not to let anyone favor one interpretation over another. All this must be followed in order to prevent disagreements and preserve the unity of the community. Men need a teacher because they lack the knowledge and the ability to choose the most valid

interpretation. If all interpretations that can be inferred from the external sense are wrong and that the purpose of the sentence is not the outward meaning but rather refers to a metaphor, wisdom requires that there be someone in the community able to explain these metaphors in order to prevent Muslims from falling into error. There must be someone in the community competent to guide and teach. This Professor and Guide is the Imām. The *Imāma* is obligatory (al-Kirmānī 2007: 72-3).

In this verse (42:10), "In whatever matter about which you differ, the ultimate authority belongs to God," God banned the use of analogical reasoning. God did not give Muslims the authority and right to interpret the Qur'ān based on analogical reasoning. He even said in this verse (4:59): "If you disagree about a matter refer it to God and the Messenger." Since we cannot use analogical reasoning, it is necessary that there be a Successor to the Prophet who issues rulings where differences of opinion occur. This person is the Imām and the *Imāma* is necessary (al-Kirmānī 2007: 76-7).

According to al-Naysābūrī, if it was acceptable that the creatures had no Imām, it would have been necessarily acceptable at the time of Adam. At that time God decided to establish a Vice Regent on earth (2:30) and chose him; He did not let the people choose their Imām. When the son of Adam was designated Imām, there is an indication that the world cannot exist without an Imām. All the people accept the Imāms during the period of Adam but deny them in the period of Muḥammad. The Ark of Noah symbolizes the Imām and Noah invited his people to recognize him. Noah designated his son Shem as Imām (al-Naysābūrī 2010: 76).

Nāṣir-i Khusraw was a *ḥujja* of Khurasān, although it should be noted that the rank of *ḥujja* during the Fāṭimid period is not equivalent to the rank of *ḥujja* in Alamūt (see below) and afterward. In his *Shish Faṣl* ("Six Chapters"), he gives some examples of spiritual exegesis (*ta'wīl*). He explains that God speaks about the believer in this verse: "Seek the forgiveness of your Lord, and turn to Him in repentance; that He may grant you enjoyment, good (and true), for a term appointed, and bestow His abounding grace on all who abound in merit! But if ye turn away, then I fear for you the penalty of a great day" (Q 11:3). Nāṣir-i Khusraw indicates that the expression "a term appointed" signifies that God will guide the believer toward the knowledge of truth when he will acknowledge the Lord of the time, that is, the Imām, who is the supreme teacher (Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1949: 36-7). The Qur'ān is presented in the form of symbols and parables which are beyond the human intellect to unravel their contradictions, if they are not clarified by the true Imām (Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1949: 49-50).

For Nāṣir-i Khusraw, the Qur'ān should be revealed by stages in order for the Imāms, in their own times, to reveal gradually to the people the inner sense by their *ta'wīl*. This is indicated in "[It is] a Qur'an which We have divided (into parts from time to time), in order that thou might recite it to men at intervals. We have revealed it by stages" (Q 17:106; Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1949: 51-2). He further explains that the manifestation of the *Qā'im-i qiyāmat* is the purpose of creation. All the prophets previously announced his advent and warned the people about his power, as it is said in Q 78:1-3: "Concerning what are they disputing? Concerning the great news, about which they cannot agree" (Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1949: 59-60).

Alamūt Exegetes

The Alamūt period extended from Imām Nizār to Imām Rukn al-dīn Khurshāh. The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī state was established in Alamūt by Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124). The *sharīʿa* was abolished only during the *qiyāmat-i qiyāmat* (“great resurrection”) proclaimed by Imām Ḥasan ʿAlā Dhikrihi al-Salām in 559/1164. According to Henry Corbin:

What the proclamation implied was nothing less than the coming of a pure spiritual Islām, freed from all spirit of legalism and of all enslavement to the law, a personal religion of the Resurrection which is spiritual birth, in that it makes possible the discovery and the living realisation of the spiritual meaning of the Prophetic revelations. (Corbin 1993: 95)

Alamūt theosophy enhanced the value of *bāṭin* while considering *ẓāhir* as an essential first step in the initiation. Later, during his *imāma*, Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥasan re-established the religious law. Alamūt was destroyed by the Mongol Hülāgū in 654/1256, but Ismāʿīlism survived in Persia under the cover of Ṣūfism.

Al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), an influential historian of religions and heresiographer who lived during that time, secretly adhered to Nizārī Ismāʿīlism. In his *Milal* (al-Shahrastānī 1366–75/1947–55: I, 560–2), he takes the position of *ḥunafāʾ* (plural of *ḥanīf*, those who “adhere to pure monotheism”) against the Qurʾānic Sabians on the necessity of a human guide gifted with impeccability. In his *Nihāya*, he insists on the fact that the prophet confirms his predecessors while proclaiming his successor (al-Shahrastānī 1934: 486). He cites a tradition generally quoted by Shīʿites according to which “the earth will never be deprived of an Imām [acting according to] the divine command (*amr*)” (al-Shahrastānī 1934: 478–9).

In the *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* (“The Keys of Mysteries”), al-Shahrastānī asserts that

the people and the awaiting Shīʿites (*al-Shīʿa al-muntazira*) do not profess anything except an absent and awaited Imām while God has on earth “Honored servants [who] speak not before He speaks, and act [in all things] by His command” (Q 21:27). “He chose the servants as heirs of His book” (Q 35:32). Whoever fights them, fights God; whoever loves them, loves God; whoever obeys them, obeys God; whoever prostrates himself before them prostrates himself before God. (al-Shahrastānī 1989: I, 121 *verso* to 122 *recto*; a similar idea is expressed by al-Nuʿmān 1956: 38)

In most of his writings, al-Shahrastānī demonstrates his fidelity to ʿAlī and the *ahl al-bayt*. He quotes another well-known tradition, in which Muḥammad declares: “There is one among you who will fight for the [correct] interpretation (*taʿwīl*) of the Qurʾān just as I myself fought for its revelation (*tanzīl*); he is the one (ʿAlī) who sews up [my] sandal” (al-Shahrastānī 1366–75/1947–55: I, 409–10).

In the *Majlis*, al-Shahrastānī clearly distinguishes different spiritual ranks: Moses as the judge of *sharīʿa*, Khidr as the deputy of the judge of resurrection (*qiyāma*), and ʿAlī as the riser (*qāʾim*). Two lights were inherited from Abraham: an apparent light (*nūr-ī ẓāhir*) and a hidden one (*nūr-ī mastūr*). These two lights recall the Shīʿī concepts of

nūr al-nubuwwa (“light of prophecy”) and *nūr al-imāma* (“light of the *imāma*”). Al-Shahrestānī teaches some Ismā'īlī concepts such as *amr* (“command”) versus *khalq* (“creation”), ‘Alī at the level of the first command, and Ḥasan as the heir of the revelation. The *Majlis* lays emphasis on the necessity of a guide belonging to the spiritual and physical world. For each spiritual level there is a teacher (al-Shahrestānī 1998: 95). For al-Shahrestānī, the star, moon, and sun, mentioned in the Qur’ān, must be interpreted as referring to different ranks in the spiritual hierarchy. The *dā’ī* (the “summoner,” symbolized by the star), the *ḥujja* (the “proof,” represented by moon), and the Imām (symbolized by the sun) are manifest in the world. Al-Shahrestānī explains clearly that on the day of resurrection, ‘Alī will have the function of the riser (*qā’im*) who separates those deserving paradise from those deserving hell. The description of ‘Alī as the *qā’im* has an Ismā'īlī imprint (more particularly Nizārī). Abū Ishāq-i Quhistānī (d. 904/1448), a Nizārī Ismā'īlī author, refers to a prophetic tradition describing ‘Alī as the *qā’im*. He quotes a *ḥadīth*: “And Muṣṭafā [Muḥammad] said that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, may God beautify his countenance, will, on the day of resurrection, raise the banner of the *qiyāma* single-handed” (Abū Ishāq-i Quhistānī 1959: 40).

In his *Majlis*, al-Shahrestānī gives a spiritual exegesis of the initiation of Moses by the servant of God as recounted in Q 18:59–82. His understanding of the dynamic evolution of humanity is similar to Ismā'īlism in which each prophet opens a new cycle. Along with Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, he brings a new understanding of the Nizārī Ismā'īlī tradition. In the Alamūt period, Moses, who is part of the ephemeral world, corresponds to the speaking-prophet at the rank of the universal soul. On the other hand, Khiḍr, the *ḥujja*, at the rank of the universal intellect, belongs to the eternal world. Al-Shahrestānī relates the spiritual evolution of Abraham in the same way as it is related by Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī in his *Kitāb al-iṣlāḥ* (“The Book of Restoration”) and by al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān in his *Asās al-ta’wīl*. These Ismā'īlī authors relate the initiation of Abraham by the *dā’ī* (the star), then by the *ḥujja* (the moon), and finally by the Imām (the sun) before reaching the prophetic level (Steigerwald 1997: 294–5). Al-Shahrestānī identifies Khiḍr as the servant of God who gradually initiates Moses to esoteric truths. Khiḍr helps Moses ascend to the spiritual ranks. The figure of Khiḍr, in al-Shahrestānī’s *Majlis*, is equivalent to the *ḥujjat-i Imām* (“proof of the Imām”), who is a dignitary second only in importance to the Imām in Nizārī Ismā'īlism. Unlike the speaking-prophet, the *ḥujja* is infallible; he is similar to the “perfect man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) of the Ṣūfīs. Khiḍr is immortal and in possession of an esoteric gnosis beyond time and space. In this passage Khiḍr rebukes Moses:

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow are all temporal: they all pertain to time. And you, of course, being a temporally bound man, a man of “the times,” you pass judgment according to “the times.” But I am not a “man of the times”: yesterday, tomorrow, and today to me are all one. Whatever shall come into existence in the future has already occurred for me. The tyrant who “shall come in the future” has already visited me. The infidelity of that child, that is bound to occur, has for me already happened. The wall that shall crumble for me has already fallen down. Therefore, I don’t pass judgment according to “the times,” for the judgment I pass is not a temporal one; it transcends time. You must spend an entire year

wandering about to find me, whereas I can find you instantaneously, in a single moment traveling from East to West. Time and space obey my dictates. I transcend space and time, so that all the judgments I pass are not subject to temporal or spatial conditions, nor pertain to what is temporal. (al-Shahrestānī 1998: 103; unpublished partial English translation of Leonard Lewisohn)

Moses is the judge of religious law while Khidr is the deputy of the judge of resurrection (i.e., ‘Alī) (al-Shahrestānī 1998: 47, 94). Apparently, on the level of *zāhir*, the actions of Khidr (Khidr tore a ship open to drown its people and he killed a boy) seem to go against the law; but in its inner reality, it is in agreement with it because Khidr knows its deepest meanings.

In the *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, al-Shahrestānī presents a spiritual exegesis of the two first Qur’ānic chapters based on the sayings attributed to the *ahl al-bayt*. Al-Shahrestānī praises ‘Alī and the *ahl al-bayt* and tells us that the prophet designated his family to assemble the Qur’ān. Therefore, only the compilation of ‘Alī was valuable and perfect. Al-Shahrestānī condemns exegeses based on personal opinions; he explains that some verses need the intervention of an authority. The interpretation of the Qur’ān belongs to ‘Alī and his successors. Al-Shahrestānī quotes a *ḥadīth* of the prophet which says that the Qur’ān was revealed according to seven letters (*hurūf*) corresponding to seven levels of interpretation. He distinguishes between *ta’wīl* and *tafsīr*. *Tafsīr* comes from *fassara*, which means “to comment,” but it is also close to *saḥara* (“unveil”) in the sense of *kashaḥa* (“discover, unveil”). All *ta’wīl* is a *tafsīr*, but not all *tafsīr* is *ta’wīl*. *Ta’wīl* means to take back the thing to its first meaning. Al-Shahrestānī relates the allegorical verses (*mutashābihāt*) of the Qur’ān to the temporal world while the fundamental verses (*muḥkamāt*) of established meaning are referred to the spiritual world (al-Shahrestānī 1989: 307–8, 310–12; Steigerwald 1997: 70–2).

Naṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 676/1274) described his conversion into Ismā‘īlism in one of his works, *Sayr wa sulūk* (“Contemplation and Action”). In another work, *Taṣawwurāt*, he gives a *ta’wīl* of the seven Ismā‘īlī pillars of Islām which is complementary to the one of al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān. The *shahāda* (“profession of faith”) means to recognize God. *Ṭahāra* (“ritual ablution”) indicates that one has to dissociate oneself from established religious rules. *Namāz* (“congregational prayer”) implies preaching the recognition of God. *Rūza* (“fasting”) signifies practicing *taqiyya* (“precautionary dissimulation”), meaning that one should not reveal esoteric meanings of the Qur’ān to those who are unable to understand them. *Zakāt* (“religious obligatory alms”) means to impart to others what God has given to us. *Hajj* (“pilgrimage”) symbolizes giving up the attachment to this material world to look for the eternal realm. The seventh pillar, *jihād* (“exertion for a religious cause”), means to seek annihilation of oneself in God (al-Ṭūsī 1950: 106).

Abū Ishāq-i Quhistānī, a Nizārī Ismā‘īlī *dā‘ī* who lived during the *imāma* of Imām Mustanṣir bi’llāh II (d. 885/1480), explains that the *waṣī*, the successor of the prophet, gives knowledge to everyone according to his capacity. To those who accept only the plain revelation (*tanzīl*), he speaks in the line of *tanzīl*, and to those who accept the *ta’wīl*, he reveals its inner meanings. The function of ‘Alī was to bring his community from a

state of being lost in the letter of religious law to a world of truth (Abū Ishāq-i Quhistānī 1959: 31–2). For Abū Ishāq-i Quhistānī, the one who understands the mysteries of the religious law has attained the truth. Those who know the Imām have reached a state of “permanent prayer” as they are mentioned in this Qur’ānic passage: “Those who remain steadfast to their prayer” (Q 70:13). The outward injunction does not apply to them. Another verse of the Qur’ān mentioned is: “Within it shall be mercy, and outside and before it is torment” (Q 57:13). Therefore, those who know the inner meanings of the religious law (*sharī‘a*) pertain to the world of mercy. For Abū Ishāq-i Quhistānī, the physical body is the grave and the injunctions of the *sharī‘a* are the torments of the grave reserved for those who are attached exclusively to the letter of *sharī‘a* (Abū Ishāq-i Quhistānī 1959: 53).

Mustanşir bi’llāh II, a Nizārī Imām, in his *Pandiyāt-i Jawān mardī* (“Advices of Manliness”) gives instruction to his followers:

If a man does not recognize the Imām of his time, does not accept him as such, treats his orders as already contained in the plain commandments of the *sharī‘a*, ascertains from the ordinary theologians the indications of the Qur’ān and the various *ḥadīths* concerning the institution of *imāma*, and if he acts according to the theologians’ opinion, all his pious acts will be fruitless.... This is because the correct meaning of the Qur’ān and *ḥadīths* is only with the Imām. The prophet, peace be upon him, himself said that whoever accepted his progeny and the book of God as his guidance would never be lost. The expression “my progeny” refers to the Imām, according to the words of the Q 3:30: “...my progeny, one following the other.” But the Imām can only be recognized with the help of another Imām, being the person whom the Imām appoints to that office from amongst his own progeny. Only he will be the Imām, no one else. Ordinary mortals cannot appoint any one as their Imām. (Mustanşir bi’llāh II 1953: 48–9)

Hence Imām Mustanşir bi’llāh II clearly states the necessity to accept the Qur’ān and the “Imām of the time” as the only one who knows the inner and deepest Qur’ānic meanings.

Ginānic Exegetes

The Ginānic period began with Imām Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad (d. ca. 720/1320) and ended with Imām Khalīl Allāh III (d. 1233/1818). The Pīrs started to preach in northern India around the end of the thirteenth century. The Pīr (*ḥujja*), at the spiritual level of the “universal intellect,” is the second most important dignitary after the Imām in the spiritual hierarchy. The most important Pīrs were Pīr Shams (d. ca. mid-eighth/fourteenth century), Pīr Şadr al-Dīn (d. end eighth/fourteenth century), and Pīr Ḥasan Kābir al-Dīn (d. end ninth/fifteenth century). The Pīrs composed *Gināns* (mystical odes) which give an esoteric interpretation of the Qur’ān and contain moral and religious instructions leading to the *sat panth* (“true path” or *al-şirāṭ al-mustaqīm*). The *Gināns* are “anagogic” in nature because they can create a tapestry of multi-leveled meanings. According to Āghā Khān III (d. 1376/1957), those who rejected the

Qurʾān of ʿAlī will remain ignorant of its real content until the judgment day (Āghā Khān III 1950: I, 63–4, guidance delivered on December 31, 1893). He describes the revealed book, the Qurʾān, as containing ten extra parts for which Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn has given explanations in his *Gināns* (Āghā Khān III 1950: I, 81, guidance delivered on July 1, 1899).

One of the major themes developed in the *Gināns* is the mystical quest of spiritual knowledge through the reminiscence (*dhikr*) of the divine name. Many Qurʾānic verses (Q 29:44–5; 76:25–6; etc.) relate the importance of remembering the *logos* (divine word) in order to become closer to the One above all else (Steigerwald 1999: 175–96). Muḥammad is called the master (*guru*) of the word: he will guide each believer on the spiritual path (Imām Shāh 1972: 475; Ṣadr al-Dīn in *Collectanea* 1948: 114). The disciple is initiated into the knowledge of the *ism-i aẓām* (“supreme name”); in the *ginān* the equivalent technical word is *bol* or *nām* or *shabda* (Shackle and Moir 1992: 150). This quest has a Qurʾānic root: “But keep in remembrance the name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him whole-heartedly” (Q 73:8).

The true word (*sat shabda*) is our Master (*Guru*),
The world does not recognize it.
Reflect upon the true word (*sat shabda*)
Utter *Pīr-Shāh* [Pīr = *hujjat al-Imām*, Shāh = Shīʿī Imām] frequently.
(Pīr Shams 1985: 41)

Muḥammad, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, and ʿAlī are part of the “the five companions of the mantle,” *panj-tan-i pāk*, in Shīʿī doctrine (Nanji 1985: 170–1). These luminous creatures were part of the initial act of divine creation. Before the physical creation, there was only God (*nārāyana*), the Originator, the Everlasting and above all Attributes. The unknowable mystery (*bāṭin*) wanted to manifest (*ẓāhir*) himself. After a while, his desire becomes a reality by originating the spiritual world of the *panj-tan-i pāk*: the light of ʿAlī, Muḥammad, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn. These five lights were the former *creatio ex nihilo* which came out of the mouth of God (Nārāyana); this metaphor corresponds to the idea of the *kūn* of the verbal Qurʾānic command (*amr*) or word (*kalima*). The *panj-tan-i pāk* refers to the Qurʾānic *ahl al-bayt* (Q 33:33; 2:177). This Ginānic understanding goes beyond the apparent meanings of the Qurʾān and gives importance to the *ahl al-bayt* (Steigerwald 1987: 70–113).

The concept of light developed in the Qurʾān, more particularly in *sūrat al-nūr* (Q 24), was extensively commented on in Shīʿī literature. Hence the “blessed olive tree” of Q 24:35 symbolizes the Imām who is the source of light. Pīr Shams, in his *Garbī* (*Collectanea* 1948: 59), relates that the light of Imām will remain eternally present in the world. The Imām is manifest in all the spiritual levels to guide believers, but his real being is perceived differently according to each individual. This doctrine of “monorealism” previously existed in the Hindu Vaiṣṇava tradition; it was taken over by the Ismāʿīlī Pīrs and is associated with the necessity of the living Imām. The Imām’s presence is symbolized by the sun (Imām Shāh 1972: 304, 353) that precedes the origin of humanity and will continue to exist until the end of time. As the sun is essential for the survival of all

beings, the Imām is essential for the salvation of his disciples. And those “who recognize the Lord of the time acquire immortality” (*Collectanea* 1948: 65).

The Pīr must heal and shape the soul of his disciple and transmit to him the necessary *ta'lim* (“teaching”) to reach the mystical union. Every Pīr gives the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān in their *Gināns*; thus, the esoteric truth can only be accessible through the Pīr, the holder of wisdom. The disciple is unable to unravel the true nature of the Imām alone; the Pīr is the link between the disciple and the Imām.

The Nizārī Pīrs presented Islam in a form that was attractive to Hindus. They tried to convey the spirit of Islam and explained its high ideals in familiar terms that would be understood by new converts from Hinduism. They presented Islam as the crowning phase of Hinduism; the Qur'ān was presented as the final Veda, completing previous revelations. In Ginānic tradition, the light of prophecy and the light of *imāma* must always be present in this world. The “light of Muḥammad” was transferred to Ḥasan b. 'Alī and afterward through a specific line of Pīrs whereas the light of *Imāma* came from Abū Ṭālib. Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn wrote in one of his *Gināns* that those who possess the true knowledge of the Qur'ān (*Atharva-Veda*) know the “lord of the time” (*Imām al-zamān*) who is now unveiled (*Collectanea* 1948: 105). Sayyid Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh in one of his *Ginān* wrote: “No one has the knowledge of the mystery of the Lord of the time, the Naklankī. Only those can recognize him who are guided by the Guru. Know the true Guru in the person of Muḥammad the Apostle of God” (*Collectanea* 1948: 111). Here Naklankī refers to Imām 'Alī and all Imāms who will succeed until the day of resurrection.

Modern Exegetes

The current period started from the first Āghā Khān (Shāh Ḥasan 'Alī, d. 1298/1881). Until recently, the Imāms were living in the Indian subcontinent, but they now have relocated to Europe. His Highness Prince Karīm Aghā Khān IV, the spiritual head of the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs, today lives in France. During this period, the present Imām gives a spiritual exegesis of the Qur'ān suited for modern times. He mainly emphasizes an intellectual approach to the Qur'ān and favors the use of intellect (*'aql*) as a means to acquire knowledge.

Pīr Shihāb al-Dīn Shāh (d. 1302/1885), the son of the 47th Imām of the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs Āghā Khān II (Shāh 'Alī Shāh), also acknowledged the importance of the intellect. In his treatise *Risālat dar ḥaqīqat-i dīn* (“The True Meaning of Religion”), he explains that in order to remain on the right path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) one must follow the intellect, which has the capacity to discover the purpose of creation. Shihāb al-Dīn quotes some traditions: “O, Muḥammad, if not for thy sake, We would not have created this world.” “If there were no 'Alī, We would not have created thee (Muḥammad).” For Shihāb al-Dīn, the purpose of creation is to reveal to humanity both Muḥammad and 'Alī. If the prophet did not proclaim the *walāya* of 'Alī, his mission would have remained incomplete as it is clearly stated in the Qur'ān: “Apostle! Proclaim the (message) which has been sent to you from your Lord. If you do not, you will not have fulfilled and

proclaimed His mission” (Q 5:70). Muḥammad was entrusted the outward dimension of religion while ‘Alī inherited its inward dimension (Shihāb al-Dīn Shāh 1947: 14–15, 23–4, 43). Concerning the Qur’ān, Pīr Shihāb al-Dīn wrote:

Under ‘Uthmān the authorities selected some portions, rejecting others. It would be too long to narrate this in detail. Then they seized by force all the other copies, and burnt them. Thus the knowledge of the original Qur’ān which was really left by the prophet, and which remains in the hands of his *‘itrat*, or legitimate successors, was taken from the people. But these legitimate lieutenants of the prophet still remained. (Shihāb al-Dīn Shāh 1947: 63)

Thus, for Pīr Shihāb al-Dīn, the knowledge of the Qur’ān will always remain in the hands of the Imām of the time, who has to be physically present in this world.

The Imām Āghā Khān III (d. 1376/1957), in his *Memoirs*, gives some idea of his approach to the Qur’ān:

To a certain extent I have found that the following verse of the Qur’ān (*sūrat al-nūr*, Q 24:35), so long as it is understood in a purely non-physical sense, has given assistance and understanding to myself and other Muslims. I must, however, warn all who read it not to allow their material critical outlook to break in with literal, verbal explanations of something that is symbolic and allegorical. (Āghā Khān III 1954: 172–3)

Āghā Khān III further expounds on how the faithful should approach the Qur’ān:

Fortunately the Qur’ān has itself made this task easy, for it contains a number of verses which declare that Allāh speaks to man in allegory and parable. Thus the Qur’ān leaves the door open for all kinds of interpretations without any one interpreter being able to accuse another of being non-Muslim. A felicitous effect of this fundamental principle of Islam, that the Qur’ān is constantly open to allegorical interpretation, has been that our Holy Book has been able to guide and illuminate the thought of believers, century after century, in accordance with the conditions and limitations of intellectual apperception imposed by external influences in the worlds. It leads also to a greater charity among Muslims, for since there can be no cut-and-dried interpretation all schools of thought can unite in the prayer that the Almighty in His infinite mercy may forgive any mistaken interpretation of the faith whose cause is ignorance or misunderstanding. (Āghā Khān III 1954: 173)

Āghā Khān III proceeds further by explaining the task of the Shī‘ī Imām who:

is thus the Successor of the Prophet in his religious capacity; he is the man who must be obeyed and who dwells among those from whom he commands spiritual obedience....The Shī‘ites say that this authority is all-pervading and is concerned with spiritual matters also, that is transferred by inherited right to the Prophet’s Successors of his blood. (Āghā Khān III 1954: 178–9)

Āghā Khān IV, the present living Imām, in a speech delivered at the Ismā‘īlī Centre (London) on October 19, 2003 at the opening session of “Word of God, Art of Man: The

Qur'ān and its Creative Expressions," maintains a similar understanding of the Qur'ān as his grandfather (Āghā Khān III):

The Holy Book continues to guide and illuminate the thought and conduct of Muslims belonging to different communities of interpretation and spiritual affiliation, from century to century, in diverse cultural environments. The Noble Qur'ān extends its principle of pluralism also to adherents of other faiths. It affirms that each has a direction and path to which they turn so that all should strive for good works, in the belief that, wheresoever they may be, Allāh will bring them together.... Scientific pursuits, philosophic inquiry and artistic endeavor are all seen as the response of the faithful to the recurring call of the Qur'ān to ponder the creation as a way to understand Allāh's benevolent majesty. As *Sūrat al-Baqara* proclaims: "Wherever you turn, there is the face of Allāh." Does not the Qur'ān challenge the artist, as much as the mystic, to go beyond the physical – the outward – so as to seek to unveil that which lies at the center but gives life to the periphery?... The Qur'ān's is an inclusive vision of society that gives primacy to nobility of conduct. It speaks of differences of language and color as a divine sign of mercy and a portent for people of knowledge to reflect upon. Ours is a time when knowledge and information are expanding at an accelerating and, perhaps, unsettling pace. There exists, therefore, an unprecedented capacity for improving the human condition. And yet, ills such as abject poverty and ignorance, and the conflicts these breed, continue to afflict the world. The Qur'ān addresses this challenge eloquently. The power of its message is reflected in its gracious disposition to differences of interpretation; its respect for other faiths and societies; its affirmation of the primacy of the intellect; its insistence that knowledge is worthy when it is used to serve Allāh's creation; and, above all, its emphasis on our common humanity. (Āghā Khān IV 2003: 2–3)

Thus for Āghā Khān IV, the Qur'ān, full of parables and allegories, allows for the freedom of interpretation which permits it to guide and illuminate Muslims living in different cultural environments. The Qur'ān invites Muslims to ponder creation in order to understand God. Hence it becomes a source of inspiration for many scientific, philosophic, and artistic inquiries. The holy book also inspires the development of ethical behavior, respect for other faiths, and the acquisition of knowledge to serve Allāh's creation.

Conclusion

The Ismā'īlīs belong to the Shī'ī branch of Islām. The *imāma* is a cardinal principle of Shī'ī faith since it is only through the Imām that true knowledge can be obtained. The main principle of Shī'ī exegesis is based on the fact that the Qur'ān has an outer dimension (*zāhir*) and an inner dimension (*bāṭin*); its inner dimension has up to seven inner dimensions. Fāṭimid Ismā'īlī theosophy preserves the equilibrium between the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin* while the Alamūt theosophy enhanced the value of *bāṭin* while considering *zāhir* as an essential first step in the initiation.

The Nizārī Ismā'īlīs maintain, like the Shī'ites of the first four *hijrī* centuries, that 'Uthmān excised significant verses from the original Qur'ān. There are many differences between the Nizārī and the Musta'li branches of Ismā'īlism even if they share a common

ground; these differences were minute at the beginning but they became deeper when the last Mustaʿlī Imām went into occultation (*ghayba*) in 495/1101. Following the occultation (*ghayba*) of their Imām, the Mustaʿlī Shīʿī community no longer had access to the direct guidance of their Imām, and aside from the *ʿulamāʾ* (religious scholars), their only source of guidance was the ʿUthmānic Qurʾān. Since there is no concept of *ghayba* in Nizārī Ismāʿīlism, they rely mainly on the living Imām to update the Qurʾān according to the times and to uncover its esoteric meanings.

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CHAPTER 32

Modern and Contemporary Interpretation of the Qurʾān

Johanna Pink

At various points during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most parts of the Islamic world entered a period of rapid and massive transformation. Colonialism and the advent of nation-states, the spread of new technologies and media, and far-reaching legal and social changes posed challenges to Muslim scholarly discourses in all fields of Islamic learning, including Qurʾānic exegesis. Changing global power relations made Muslim scholars examine what it was that had enabled Europe to dominate the Muslim world. Ideas and paradigms of European origin gained increasing relevance in Muslim exegetical debates, whether they were considered progressive and potentially beneficial or morally corrupt and threatening. New questions needed to be discussed. For example, was the abolition of slavery acceptable from a religious point of view? What role could nation-states play in relation to the *umma*, the community of Muslim believers? Were the traditions of Islamic scholarship really as backward, irrational, and hostile to progress as many Western orientalists claimed? Finding answers to questions such as these from within an Islamic frame of reference led many Muslim scholars and intellectuals to engage with both the Qurʾān and its exegetical tradition in ways that sometimes built upon this tradition, sometimes aimed at transforming it and, in a few instances, strove to discard much or all of it.

In order to understand the often dialectical effects that these exegetical endeavors had, it is necessary to look first at some characteristics of the tradition that explain its continuing relevance, its limitations, and the mixed success of modern¹ and contemporary attempts to break away from it.

The Evolution of the Exegetical Tradition

When trying to gauge the relationship between the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis, which has its main locus in the genre of the Qur'ān commentary (*tafsīr*), and modern exegetical thought, it is instructive to look at a fairly recent encyclopedic² Qur'ān commentary, *Tafsīr al-Mishbāh*, by the eminent Indonesian exegete Muhammad Quraish Shihab (b. 1944) (Shihab 2000–3). In this work, one encounters the same structure that characterized pre-modern works of the genre (Calder 1993). A segment of the Qur'ān is always followed by a commentary. That commentary, besides discussing semantic and syntactic problems, cites numerous authorities, discusses their diverse and sometimes contradictory exegetical opinions, draws on references from other fields, ranging from Sufism and philosophy to contemporary debates on lifestyle and politics, and finally comes to a conclusion – sometimes. In other instances, the exegete purposely refrains from expressing a preference. His selection of authorities seems curious at first glance. He particularly often quotes Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. 'Umar al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480–1), an exegete of limited renown in pre-modern times whose ideas about the logic behind the sequence of Qur'ānic verses have attracted increasing interest in recent decades. Shihab also makes ample use of the Qur'ān commentaries by the Tunisian jurist al-Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr (1879–1973), the Iranian Shī'ite scholar Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1903–82), the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Quṭb (1906–66), and the Egyptian TV preacher Muḥammad al-Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī (1911–98). The range of authorities he occasionally draws upon is broader; it covers the time span from the ninth to the twentieth century CE and disciplines as diverse as theology, law, Ṣūfism, hermeneutics, and literature. He quotes rival authorities who were very critical of each other; and yet they serve to round up the interpretations that Quraish Shihab himself wants to present. In his commentary, no rupture is discernible between pre-modern and modern exegesis; while twentieth-century exegetes are certainly overrepresented in the range of sources, they are accorded neither a different status nor a higher or lower authority than exegetes from the classical period.

All these are features typical of most pre-modern Qur'ān commentaries. Being part of a “genealogical tradition” (Saleh 2004: 14), they tend to build upon the totality of the previous exegetical tradition, including contradictory opinions as well as interpretations they disagree with. Thereby, they reflect the consensus (*ijmā'*) of a diachronic scholarly community. The Qur'ān commentary by Muhammad Quraish Shihab exhibits precisely the same features that Walid Saleh has described for the classical Qur'ān commentary tradition: First, it will never completely oust a major component of the tradition once it has gained entry; second, it is always possible for an exegete to recur to a temporarily forgotten interpretation or method because it is still a part of the totality of the tradition; and third, that tradition has the power to absorb even works that aimed at transforming or overthrowing it (Saleh 2004: 15).

Surprising though it may seem, these observations are highly relevant for a chapter on modern Qur'ānic exegesis because they explain several distinctive features of Qur'ān interpretation in the modern period. Up to this day, as Shihab's example shows, works are being produced that are part of the tradition of the sequential (*musalsal* or *taḥlīlī*)

Qur'ān commentary. And more importantly, this tradition is strong enough to integrate even such works that strove to disassociate themselves from it. For example, Shihab's main references include two authorities who consciously did not label their works as *tafsīr*. Both Sayyid Quṭb and al-Sha'rāwī preferred to portray their Qur'ān commentaries as personal reflections on the Qur'ān that do not, or infrequently, make use of the sources and methods that a scholar would conventionally be expected to take into account. Their access to the Qur'ān is personal, informed by contemporary concerns, and directed through mass media at a broad popular audience – and yet, their works have been assimilated into the *tafsīr* tradition and are being used as authoritative references by later scholars.

The fifteenth-century exegete al-Biqā'ī, on the other hand, had been all but forgotten for a long time until he was rediscovered in the twentieth century as a forerunner of an increasing interest in the logic behind the composition of the Qur'ān (Mir 1993), which points to another aspect that is very relevant to any discussion of modern and contemporary Qur'ānic exegesis: The defining features and the innovative character of a work of *tafsīr* may in some cases not be based as much on the original ideas of its author as on the authorities he chooses to refer to, and those he chooses to omit.

I do not presume to claim, of course, that there have been no attempts at radical innovation in the modern and contemporary period. Even Quraish Shihab has, beside his conventional voluminous encyclopedic Qur'ān commentary, produced other works, such as a thematic Qur'ān interpretation, and has even performed Qur'ānic exegesis on TV (Ikhwan 2015). However, before expanding on such transformations and innovations, I want to emphasize the importance of the ongoing tradition of *tafsīr*. The continuity of this tradition, of its sources and methods, bridges the divide that might be perceived between the pre-modern and modern era. This is also attested by the immense popularity of certain pre-modern Qur'ān commentaries such as the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) or the *tafsīr* by Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), which are probably more widely sold, translated, and quoted today than any exegetical work written since the late nineteenth century. The success of such works must be treated as part of the contemporary field of Qur'ānic exegesis not only because they are so widely sold and used, but also because the exegetes who are being perceived as authoritative today are not necessarily the ones who dominated the pre-modern *madrassa* curricula. Rather, the contemporary popularity of certain pre-modern exegetes is the result of political and ideological struggles over religious legitimacy and authority in the course of which a scripturalist brand of exegesis – represented, among others, by Ibn Kathīr – was promoted by various actors, but especially by Saudi Arabia, as a so-called *salaḥī* approach to the Qur'ān. This approach is characterized by the claim to base its interpretations on no other sources than the Qur'ān and the *sunna*, to the exclusion of, for example, logical reasoning, scholastic theology, philosophy, or Judeo-Christian narrative traditions that are considered untrustworthy. Print politics – i.e., the funding of printed editions of this brand of scripturalist Qur'ān interpretation – helped to move this *salaḥī* approach from the margins to the center of the exegetical tradition (Saleh 2010). Up to this day, it is pervasive in hermeneutical debates and discourses on the Qur'ān.

The claim to resort to the fundamentals, to the exclusion of later “additions” and “falsifications,” is, however, no prerogative of socially conservative scripturalists; it can be used to various ends. On the one hand, it might indeed be used in order to delegitimize anything but extremely conservative, *ḥadīth*-based interpretations and to reject all attempts to harmonize the Qurʾān with the exigencies of modern societies. On the other hand, it might be argued that the eradication of post-Qurʾānic interpretive, legal, and dogmatic traditions, far from obliging contemporary Muslims to follow a seventh-century lifestyle, enables them to read the Qurʾān according to the needs of their time and not according to the interpretations of long-deceased scholars. By way of this argument, an increasing number of Muslim thinkers and intellectuals have since the end of the nineteenth century aimed at transforming or even revolutionizing the ways in which the Qurʾān was interpreted and in which that interpretation was transmitted. In the subsequent sections, I draw primarily on examples from the field of gender relations to represent these changes: first, because it is one of the most contested fields in contemporary Muslim religious discourse; and second, because it serves to illuminate the range of exegetical options that have been pursued throughout the modern and contemporary period. Comparable debates have taken place with respect to other issues, especially the status of non-Muslims; not all of them can be afforded equal space here.

Revolutionizing an Evolutionary Tradition

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of modernist currents in various parts of the Muslim world. The most famous proponents of these currents not only strove to interpret the Qurʾān in a way that made it, in their eyes, compatible with modern thought; they also accorded the Qurʾān a more central role than it had possessed in previous Muslim scholarship, implicitly or explicitly diminishing the value of the *sunna*. They were much concerned with the legal and ethical teachings of the Qurʾān, especially its potential to help the Muslim community regain a position of strength founded on religious values. They were equally concerned with proving the rationality of the Islamic scripture against European accusations of superstition and irrationality. In fact, many of their interpretations can only be understood as reactions to European beliefs about the inferiority of Islam, the backwardness of Muslim societies, Oriental despotism, and the oppression of women.

For example, the Indian intellectual Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817–98) published from 1880 onward a seven-volume Qurʾān commentary as well as a tract on hermeneutics. Both of these are shaped by a desire to convince Muslims to adopt Western science and technology. He argued that there can be no inherent contradiction between the Qurʾān and rational, scientific thought. The Qurʾān might talk about cosmology in terms that do not conform with scientific facts, but this is because it spoke to seventh-century Arabs in a figurative language. It did not intend to convey astronomical information, but to emphasize its message with cosmological metaphors. This return to the perspective of the first audience of the Qurʾān was to become a frequent motive in modern Qurʾānic exegesis. For Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, it fulfilled an indispensable apologetic purpose since

it allowed him to rebut arguments brought forward by Christian missionaries and Orientalists against the truth of the Qur'ānic message (Troll 1978: 144–70). It also showed an increased interest in the literary functions of the Qur'ānic rhetoric that had a precedent in the ideas of the eighteenth-century Indian reformer Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlāwī (1703–62) and was taken up by various twentieth-century exegetes.

The Egyptian scholar Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) shared some of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān's concerns. He also placed great emphasis on social progress. His lectures on the Qur'ān were written down by his disciple Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935) and published in the latter's journal, *al-Manār* ("The Lighthouse"), whose publication started in 1898. Starting in 1900, Riḍā published a Qur'ān commentary that was based on 'Abduh's lectures and complemented by Riḍā's own thoughts and additional material such as letters, newspaper articles, and other texts (Jomier 1954). After 'Abduh's death in 1905, Riḍā continued the commentary until his own death in 1935, with the result that the bulk of the commentary comes from Riḍā whose stance is distinctly more political, anti-European, and socially conservative than 'Abduh's.

For example, in an extremely extensive discussion of polygamy as it is, according to jurists and classical exegetes, permitted in Q 4:3, 'Abduh argues that the Qur'ān, far from recommending that Muslim men marry up to four wives, envisages monogamous marriage as its ideal and subjects polygamy to a stipulation that is nearly impossible to fulfill, namely the obligation to treat all wives fairly and equally. The first generation of Muslims might have been able to meet that condition due to their deep and unspoiled faith; recent generations have weaker morals and are therefore advised to abstain from polygamy. Rashīd Riḍā, on the other hand, reveals a much more ambivalent stance to the issue of polygamy than 'Abduh. While he concedes that monogamy is the ideal, he devotes an extensive discussion to the biological and social advantages of polygamy that are polemically contrasted with allegedly monogamous Western societies where men, according to Riḍā, pursue their promiscuous tendencies outside marriage. It seems to be this apologetic impetus that ultimately leads him to defend polygamy while 'Abduh had tried, if not to reject it, then at least to severely restrict its applicability ('Abduh and Riḍā 1367 [H.]: IV, 348–75).

More generally, 'Abduh's and Riḍā's discussion of polygamy is primarily concerned with the logic behind Qur'ānic prescriptions as well as their applicability to modern societies. Both 'Abduh and Riḍā place much emphasis on the ethical purpose of Qur'ānic prescriptions and their consequences in a given social context. This enables them to interpret them flexibly, by questioning whether that purpose is still fulfilled in present-day societies. Many features of this discussion are typical not only for the *Tafsīr al-Manār*, but also for its epoch and to a certain extent for many modern exegetical endeavors up to this day.

First, there is the sustained glorification of the community of the "pious forefathers," the *salaf*. This recourse to an idealized distant past is what gave the group around Muḥammad 'Abduh and his disciples its designation as *salafīyya*. It might be perceived, at first glance, as an attempt at situating the Qur'ān in its historical context. The problem with this, however, is that there is no consistent method for the reconstruction of Islam's early history. Rather, 'Abduh and Riḍā selectively use

exegetical *ḥadīths*, traditions about the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), elements of the prophet’s biography, and assumptions about the exemplary character of the early Muslim community in order to construe an ideal that contemporary Muslims are exhorted to follow. This technique is almost invariably connected to sharp criticism of the social, political, and moral decadence of modern Muslims, rulers and common believers alike. According to ‘Abduh and Riḍā, they fail to put Qur’ānic values into practice, which is the leading cause of their backwardness and inferiority to Western nations.

The relationship to Western countries, above all Britain, permeates the whole commentary. It can be seen in the frequency with which Western authorities, be they physicians or suffragettes, are quoted in order to prove the benefits of Qur’ānic ordinances and the ills of Western societies. Scientific arguments are often adduced in order to underline the wisdom of the Qur’ānic social order. The apologetic purpose of these becomes especially clear when Riḍā uses them to directly and explicitly refute specific allegations against Islam. Europeans normally took polygamy as a particularly striking sign of the backwardness and oppressiveness of Muslim societies. The European critics of the practice apparently included Lord Cromer, then British Consul-General of Egypt, to whom Riḍā claims to have written a letter on the issue which he then incorporates in his commentary on Q 4:3. Furthermore, there is a long excursus on the prophet Muḥammad’s wives which seems rather off-topic in the context, but can be explained by the fact that it was (and still is) another common topic of anti-Muslim polemics; thus, again, Riḍā’s intervention can be understood as an apology.

While the *Tafsīr al-Manār* retains many elements of pre-modern Qur’ān commentaries such as linguistic discussions, *ḥadīth* material, and long excerpts from pre-modern works, it is also indicative of a quest for new themes and a new style. The proliferation of print media in the Middle East as well as the spread of secular educational institutions had brought about massive changes in the audiences of Qur’ānic exegesis. It was no longer an endeavor purely directed at religious scholars; it was designed to reach broader intellectual elites. The authors did not necessarily have to be scholars with a traditional educational background either. While ‘Abduh was a religious scholar by training, Riḍā was not; he was an intellectual with a clear vision of the message he wanted to convey to his audience and of the audience he wanted to reach: decision-makers in the upper levels of society. For that purpose, he used a wide array of styles and sources. Into his commentary on the issue of polygamy, he incorporated, among other material, an inquiry that he had received from a lay Muslim on the topic, the *fatwā* he wrote in response, a tract by Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and a large number of quotations from Europeans and Americans taken from newspaper articles, books, or speeches concerning women’s rights issues as well as medical opinions. The journalistic nature of the *Tafsīr al-Manār* thus permeates its whole structure. It might also be one of the reasons for Riḍā’s decision to introduce an innovation in the form of extensive introductions into the overarching style and themes of each *sūra*. Through this technique, which was taken up by later exegetes, he strove to acquaint his readers with the overall message of the Qur’ān and present it as a holistic text, not just an accumulation of isolated verses as was the prevalent method among pre-modern exegetes.

Mass Media, Popular Exegesis, and Apologetics

In the course of the twentieth century, many of the tendencies that had already been discernible in the works of the early reformers became more pronounced and were further developed in many directions, with widely divergent results.

One particularly influential development was the proliferation of popularizing exegesis in the mass media. The early reformers had already written works that were meant to be printed and distributed to a wider readership, but their target group had still been restricted to a small social, intellectual, and political elite. This changed significantly towards the middle of the twentieth century due to a massive increase in literacy, the emergence of Islamist mass movements, and, especially from the 1970s onwards, the growing role of Islam in the public sphere. Qur'ānic exegesis now appeared in newspapers and was broadcast on radio and television; more recently, it has reached the Internet. Furthermore, it was no longer undertaken chiefly in Arabic, but was performed in most languages spoken by Muslims.

The new formats and audiences necessitated drastic changes in style. The average reader or listener was not interested in detailed discussions of the merits of various pre-modern interpretations; he or she was expecting an approach to the Qur'ān that provided spiritual guidance. Thus, exegesis increasingly took on the style of a sermon, directly addressing its audience and, rather than explaining the text, taking it as a cue to illuminate issues in the contemporary believers' lives. The contents of these forms of exegesis in the mass media vary, but they are rarely outright modernizing in the sense of calling for a radically new understanding of the text (Pink 2010b; Görke 2014). On the other hand, their quest for the immediate emotional and psychological effect of the text on the listener sometimes opens up original and innovative perspectives, as is evident in Sayyid Quṭb's Qur'ān commentary (Wielandt 2002).

Apologetics remain a frequent motive in an epoch that has been characterized by Western dominance or outright colonialism, anti-Islamic discourses, and an increase in *dā'wa*, the call for Islam among non-observant Muslims and non-Muslims. A particularly noteworthy aspect of the apologetic tendencies in contemporary Qur'ānic exegesis is an emphasis on science that goes far beyond the works of the early reformers, who had mainly argued that there is no inherent contradiction between the Qur'ān and scientific facts. For many subsequent exegetes, science – due to its perceived function as the main point of reference in the modern world – plays a particularly important role on two levels. On the one hand, science is used both in order to support specific interpretations and to “prove” the wisdom behind Qur'ānic rules. For example, biologist assumptions about the “scientifically proven” nature of men and women are frequently quoted in defense of gender roles and gender hierarchies (Klausning 2014). On the other hand, science has taken on a prominent role in the discourse about *i'jāz al-Qur'ān*, the inimitability of the Qur'ān, which has gained enormous prominence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sometimes labeled *tafsīr 'ilmī* (“scientific exegesis”), this discourse seeks to present arguments for the divine nature of the Qur'ān by pointing out instances in which the Qur'ān purportedly makes reference to scientific facts that were not known at the time of the prophet (Wielandt 2002). Other

branches of the contemporary *iʿjāz* discourse include historical predictions in the Qurʾān and “mathematical miracles” in its structure. In contrast, the emphasis on the Qurʾān’s inimitable language and rhetoric that was typical of the pre-modern *iʿjāz* doctrine has lost much of its importance, probably because the vast majority of participants in contemporary Islamic discourses have had no academic training in Arabic language and literature, if they speak Arabic at all.

Popularizing Qurʾānic exegesis is of particular relevance to those currents that promote the return to an idealized past, based on the fundamental sources of Islam, the Qurʾān and the *sunna*. Both in political Islam and in *salafī* circles, works of *tafsīr* have been produced that purport to offer a “correct,” unambiguous, guidance-oriented approach to the Qurʾān that incorporates the author’s ideology. Two of the most prominent protagonists of political Islam, Sayyid Quṭb and Abū al-Aʿlā al-Mawdūdī (1903–79), have written Qurʾān commentaries that have inspired many later exegetes (Quṭb 2004; Mawdūdī 1988–2009). Both works are explicitly not labeled as *tafsīr*, but rather as reflections on the Qurʾān. They pay great attention to the inner-Qurʾānic context of verses, focus on larger inner-Qurʾānic textual units, and, especially in Sayyid Quṭb’s case, search for the overarching logic in the composition of the Qurʾān. Quṭb’s and Mawdūdī’s Qurʾān commentaries are ideological in the sense that they consistently understand the Qurʾān in the light of their socio-political ideas. These emphasize the need for a Muslim society and, ultimately, a Muslim state in which God is the only sovereign as expressed by the rule of Islamic law.

A slightly different strand of fundamentalist, ideological exegesis includes Qurʾān commentaries that explicitly state that their goal is to provide a *salafī* or even jihadist reading of the Qurʾān. Their declared aim is to remove the confusion caused by conflicting interpretations and to introduce readers to the “true meaning” of the Qurʾān instead (Pink 2010a: 18f., 32f.). This true meaning, according to them, usually includes the doctrine of *al-walāʾ wa-ʿl-barāʾ* that demands the severance of all ties with polytheists and unbelievers, both of which are often rather broadly defined categories. It also requires the exact adherence to all Qurʾānic rules, whether they concern ritual purity, marital or criminal law, or in extreme cases even slavery.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Popularizing trends in the mass media are an immensely important part of contemporary Qurʾānic exegesis, but by no means the only one. Qurʾānic exegesis continues to be an academic pursuit, both in and outside the religious disciplines.

First of all, as mentioned above, the tradition of the sequential Qurʾān commentary continues in various forms besides the popularizing ones. These forms include commentaries written by scholars in order to enhance their scholarly reputation, their target group consisting of students and other scholars. They also include a relatively recent phenomenon that is closely connected to the emergence of nation-states: Qurʾān commentaries written by committees of scholars, usually commissioned by a governmental institution, that aim at presenting an authoritative Qurʾān interpretation in an

accessible form. The multitude of authors and the editorial activity involved in the production of these works make the voice of the individual scholar indiscernible. Projects of this type, which stand in stark contrast to the often encyclopedic works of individual exegetes, have been published, for example, by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion, the Egyptian al-Azhar, and the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Pink 2010b).

Both types of Qur'ān commentary, the individual scholar's and the institutional one, are typically written by religious scholars with an education in the Qur'ānic sciences and a reputation in their field. This might be one of the reasons why they rarely go as far as to propose radically new interpretations. For example, with regard to gender issues, some might reproduce the patriarchal views of pre-modern scholars, while others might propose a no less patriarchal, but modernized picture of an ideal monogamous family in which husband and wife have different, but equally valuable roles. They will, however, not usually promote an egalitarian view that would require them to reinterpret concrete legal norms derived from the Qur'ān (Klausing 2014; Pink 2011: 285–7).

There are, of course, Muslim exegetes who express egalitarian views, but they normally do so outside the genre of the sequential Qur'ān commentary. Radical innovations can most commonly be found either in works that propose new hermeneutical approaches or in thematic works on the Qur'ān's stance towards specific issues – for example, gender relations or religious pluralism.

The latter phenomenon is in line with an increasing tendency to read the Qur'ān in the light of its overarching themes, goals, and vision. The focus is typically on ethics (cf. Körner 2005), as Fazlur Rahman (1919–88), perhaps the most important pioneer of this brand of exegesis, has argued it should be (Rahman 1980). This concern with the ethical spirit of the Qur'ān finds its expression in monothematic works, but also in books that discuss the entire Qur'ān. Unlike classical Qur'ān commentaries, however, they do not proceed verse by verse, but by broader topic, often with a focus on contemporary relevance (see, e.g., Sardar 2011). This is often described by the term “thematic *tafsīr*” (*tafsīr mawḍūʿī*), although this label encompasses a wide range of approaches, from works that limit themselves to a content-oriented discussion of the *sūras* and their thematic segments (Shaltūt 2004; Ghazālī 2011) to works that provide thematic chapters in which the relevant statements in the Qur'ān are discussed (Shihab 2013).

While works that run under the label of “thematic *tafsīr*” have mostly been written by religious scholars, many of the more radically innovative thematic or hermeneutical perspectives on the Qur'ān come from academics, intellectuals, and activists outside the field of Islamic scholarship. This is especially true for the exegetical concepts that have emerged in the context of literary studies. The Egyptian Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1967), for example, and his students, among them his wife ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahmān bt. al-Shāḥīʾ (d. 1998), strove to understand the Qur'ān as a literary text that was adapted to the language and emotional universe of its first audience, and argued that it should be read as such. This necessitates a close look at the history of the Qur'ānic text and of the pre-Islamic and Muslim communities surrounding it. It also means that it is not always the literal meaning that is important, but rather the narrative intention of the text. The Qur'ān, according to al-Khūlī, is neither a history book nor

a science manual. A methodologically sound exegesis should be based on the state of the art of literary studies and could therefore be performed by believers and non-believers alike (Wielandt 2002).

A specific brand of novel hermeneutical approaches to the Qurʾān comes not so much from academia as from activism, especially in the field of women's rights. Its proponents fight against conditions that they consider oppressive, unjust, and discriminatory. Consequently, they aim to develop from the Qurʾān a vision of Islam that is egalitarian not only with regard to race, but also with respect to gender. In order to achieve this aim, they stress the need to take the patriarchal context in which the Qurʾān was revealed and traditionally interpreted into account; according to many feminist exegetes, these patriarchal perspectives have veiled the true liberating intention of the Qurʾānic message. While feminist exegetes in Western, and particularly English-speaking, countries have so far received the bulk of scholarly and public attention (Hidayatullah 2014), many of their concerns – for example, the rejection of polygamy and domestic violence – are shared by women's rights activists and movements in many regions including the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia (see, e.g., Mudzakir 2005; Yasmeen 2004).

A central feature to nearly all contemporary proposals for new approaches to Qurʾānic hermeneutics is the emphasis on history. The historical context of the revelation of the Qurʾān and its first audience must by all means be taken into account. This raises the question of the extent of our precise knowledge about these historical circumstances and the sources it is based on. An obvious source would be the prophetic *sunna*; however, its importance is heavily downplayed by many proponents of new hermeneutical approaches who prefer to focus on the Qurʾān as the central and indisputable source of guidance. The question of historical sources is rarely openly discussed, however, which creates difficulties in the application of hermeneutical concepts based on historicity. In the end, concrete attempts at historically contextualizing the Qurʾān often draw on the same *ḥadīths*, occasions of revelations, and chronological models that their pre-modern counterparts have used, albeit more selectively. This is evident, for example, in two Qurʾānic commentaries that discuss the *sūras* in their “order of revelation,” but do not critically discuss the sources on which this chronology is based and often come to rather conventional conclusions (Darwaza 2008; Jābirī 2008). Using the corpus of historical sources that are already part of the exegetical tradition often severely limits the innovative potential of new hermeneutical approaches. For example, Q 4:34, a verse that has conventionally been understood to give husbands permission to physically discipline their wives, has usually been linked with an occasion of revelation in which a woman who had been beaten by her husband demanded retribution. Muḥammad wanted to grant her that retribution, but then the verse was revealed, whereupon Muḥammad, according to this tradition, with apparent regret said that he wanted one thing, but God wanted another. Based on this tradition, it was usually taken for granted that the verse, indeed, legitimates some kind of physical action on the part of the husband against a disobedient wife (Bauer 2008). A contemporary exegete who rejects this conclusion will have to deal with the occasion of revelation in some way, either by contesting the historicity of this tradition in particular, or all occasions of

revelation in general, on some methodological basis, which is rarely done, or by tacitly ignoring it, which might expose him or her to allegations of arbitrariness.

Another option, and one that has implicitly or explicitly been pursued by a number of recent hermeneutical theorists, is to partly or entirely abandon the quest for an eternal true meaning of the Qur'ān. Instead, meaning is always dependent on the reader since, according to the principles of hermeneutics, no message can yield meaning without a recipient. The intention of the author – God – is intangible; all that is accessible is the understanding of the human recipients whose expectations and horizons change over time (see, e.g., Christmann 2006; Duderija 2011; Saeed 2006). This postmodern approach solves several dilemmas that modernist claims of finally having identified the “true meaning” of the Qur'ān tend to face: Why can we be sure that, for example, an egalitarian, pacifist, and pluralist reading of the Qur'ān is the “true meaning,” whereas previous interpretations have consistently been wrong, and how can we be sure that this “true meaning” will not be invalidated by future interpretive efforts? And what should we do with those contents of the Qur'ān that contradict this meaning? If we discard them, what criteria allow us to differentiate between eternal truths and time-bound stipulations? A postmodern approach that radically focuses on the readers' or listeners' perspectives does not raise these questions, but invariably evokes others: Is there any eternal meaning to the Qur'ānic text at all? If there is, how can we identify it with any certainty? What is the role of the speaker in the speech? And are there any boundaries to legitimate interpretation?

Contexts and Conflicts

It is precisely that last question that has generated a considerable number of conflicts around new approaches to the Qur'ān. The disruptive potential of Qur'ānic exegesis had already become apparent when Sayyid Quṭb had used the Qur'ān in order to contest the legitimacy of all current governments. In past decades, however, the backlash was particularly strong when Muslim intellectuals proposed modernist or postmodern approaches to the Qur'ān. The vehemence and consequences of the negative reactions they received differed considerably, depending on the place and circumstances they worked in. Scholars working in European or North American academia, such as Mohammed Arkoun (1928–2010) or Amina Wadud (b. 1952), might be exposed to – sometimes severe – criticism, but were free to publicize their ideas. The same is true for the Indonesian intellectual Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005), whose focus was on a pluralist reading of the Qur'ān, and for the Syrian hermeneutical theorist Muḥammad Shaḥrūr (b. 1938). Even though some of their critics went as far as to brand them as apostates, they were able to pursue their careers within their countries and to lead a public life.

Conditions have been less favorable in countries such as Pakistan and Egypt in past decades. Among the reasons for this was the strong opposition from religious scholars (*ulamā'*) who accused academics such as Amīn al-Khūlī's disciple Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallāh (1916–91), Fazlur Rahman, or the Egyptian Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943–2010) of

attempts to erode or even abolish the fundamentals of Islam and to replace them with Western or Christian concepts, for example biblical hermeneutics. The opposition from the *‘ulamā’* was not merely part of an intellectual dispute. It took place in a period in which their authority and sphere of action had been severely curtailed in most states since they had been marginalized in the fields of education and the judiciary. Thus, their opposition to new exegetical approaches to the Qur’ān, especially when proposed by intellectuals who were not *‘ulamā’*, served to demonstrate the religious scholars’ monopoly on authority in the one field that seemed to remain in their domain, namely public religious discourse. However, their vehement reactions could only constitute an existential threat to the careers and even lives of intellectuals under such authoritarian regimes that had incorporated Islam, in one way or another, into their strategies to legitimize their rule by means of a unifying ideology. Combined with pressure from Islamist movements that had been growing ever stronger since the 1970s, adverse reactions to new approaches to Qur’ānic interpretation, especially when those were advanced by academics from outside the realm of religious scholarship, were often strong enough to drive these academics into exile (Wielandt 1996).

The structures and curricula of the academic study of Islam in the various states of the Muslim world contribute to the divergence in intellectual climates that makes literary, historically contextualizing, or postmodern methods of interpreting the Qur’ān acceptable in some contexts and evokes polemical reactions in others. While in Turkey and Indonesia, for example, governments have heavily interfered with the curricula of Islamic studies, incorporating contents and methods from the humanities, social sciences, and comparative religious studies, the same has not happened in most countries of the Arab world. These decisions shape the framework in which scholars work as well as the explicit or implicit rules for what can be said and what cannot be said about the Qur’ān (Pink 2010b: 75 f.).

Unity and Diversity

Talal Asad has famously described Islam as a “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986) that connects Muslims across the globe and through the times while at the same time allowing for a multitude of context-specific practices and discourses. This seems to be an apt way to describe Muslim exegesis of the Qur’ān in the modern period. Some exegetical voices proclaim a radical rupture with the scholarly tradition of *tafsīr*, either by claiming a direct recourse to the fundamentals or by proposing innovative ways of interpreting the sacred text. Whatever their claims are, however, none of them can entirely dispense with the exegetical tradition because without the historical information contained in the occasions of revelation or the prophetic biography, and without the linguistic information transmitted by the exegetes, too much of the context that is necessary to derive meaning from the Qur’ān would be lost. Conversely, those voices that, far from rejecting the scholarly tradition of *tafsīr*, aim at continuing it, without any purifying or modernizing agenda, are not as timeless and removed from any contemporary context as they might appear at first glance. Their decision to continue the tradition under specific

circumstances, as well as their choice of methods and sources, are embedded in a context and are products of this context. When an Egyptian Azharite scholar such as Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭaṭāwī (1928–2010), who later became Shaykh al-Azhar, wrote a Qur'ān commentary that seems barely distinguishable from pre-modern works of *tafsīr* (Pink 2010b: 2), he aimed to set up himself, his institution, and his country as heirs of a scholarly tradition. This tradition is, through his works and those of other Azharites, presented as more ancient and more authoritative than both the modernizing agenda that is represented by the Turkish Republic (Körner 2005) and the purifying, fundamentalist trend that is promoted by Saudi Arabia (cf. Saleh 2010).

Thus, the tradition of *tafsīr* continues to be relevant today, both to those who challenge it and to those who follow it. However, it has spread out, transformed, gained new meanings, and become contested in ways that are specific to our age.

Notes

- 1 I use the term “modern” in an exclusively chronological sense, denoting the period that corresponds to the transformations mentioned in this paragraph. Since they did not occur suddenly and simultaneously in all parts of the Islamic world, it is impossible to pinpoint an exact date; but with respect to the emergence of modernizing trends in Qur'ānic exegesis, it starts around 1880, when the first volume of Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān's (1817–98) *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* was published. In 1884, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–97) and Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) published their journal, *al-Urwa al-Wuthqā*, and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935) started publishing his journal, *al-Manār*, in 1898.
- 2 Walid Saleh (Saleh 2004: 16–22) has proposed a distinction between encyclopedic and *madrassa*-style Qur'ān commentaries. The former, in his definition, aim at including most or all exegetical opinions and are therefore extremely voluminous, while the *madrassa*-style commentaries constitute manageable summaries of the main exegetical trends.

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PART V

Application

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CHAPTER 33

Exegetical Sciences

Jane Dammen McAuliffe

In the graduate program of any religious studies faculty in the Muslim world you will find students taking courses in something called “the sciences of the Qur’ān” (*‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*).¹ While that phrase sounds a bit strange to English-speaking ears, the field which these studies encompass has profound importance for Muslim belief and practice. Such classes cover the range of topics necessary for the development of an accurate and faithful understanding of the Qur’ān. Within the world of Muslim scholarship they are essential preparation for any credible teaching or research on the Qur’ān.

I have used the term “field” because the Qur’ānic sciences combine multiple subjects or disciplines and a full program of their study would involve serious work in all of the constitutive subfields (see McAuliffe 2002). While relatively few manage that, many students at Muslim universities are exposed to at least a general overview of the Qur’ānic sciences and publishers continually replenish their stock of relevant texts (Quṭb 1980; Ṣābūnī 1985; al-Ṣabbāgh 1986; al-Ṣāliḥ 1990; Abū Sinna 1995; ‘Ināya 1996; Rūmī 2000). Graduate students pursue more focused studies and academic research in this field continues to flourish. To understand how this curriculum, and its associated subject, evolved requires looking back at least five centuries and initiating an effort in retrospective reconstruction.

Starting with Summation

Two works represent the classical culmination of this process of discipline building. The first of these was written in the late fourteenth century, the other about a hundred years later. The earlier text is Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī’s (d. 794/1392; see *EI2*

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2004: “al-Zarkashī”) *al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (“The Proof in the Qur’ānic Sciences”), while the later is Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 911/1505) *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (“The Perfection in the Qur’ānic Sciences”). Both are the primary citations in any contemporary textbook on this topic. The tale that ties them together proves that in late fifteenth-century Egypt academic competition was alive and well.

The connection between these two works begins with a story of academic discovery and of an author’s discomfiture at seeing his own efforts surpassed. As al-Suyūṭī tells this tale in the first pages of his *Itqān*, it is easy to recognize the mixed feelings that such a discovery would prompt in any scholar. Using a formulaic introductory format, al-Suyūṭī begins the *Itqān* with a lament for the lack of any work on the Qur’ānic sciences that could compare with those available for the sciences of *ḥadīth*. With a dismissive mention of some prior efforts, he describes his own first attempt to fill this void. In 872/1467, while still a very young man, al-Suyūṭī tells us that he completed a book entitled *al-Taḥbīr fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*. He then provides its table of contents, numbering 102 chapters. Only after its completion, al-Suyūṭī continues, and while still enjoying a justifiable pride in his considerable accomplishment, did he learn of the existence of an earlier and more comprehensive work, that of al-Zarkashī.

Accordingly, he cites the full table of contents for the *Burhān*, expresses his delight at discovering it, and promptly decides to improve upon al-Zarkashī’s work. Thus is born the *Itqān*, which al-Suyūṭī promises will be better organized than its predecessor, with additional material “to please its listeners” (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 14).² A comparison of the two works reveals that at some points al-Suyūṭī acknowledges his dependence upon his predecessor and at others he draws from it without explicit acknowledgment. For present purposes, however, the links are less important than the structure and taxonomy that each of these summations conveys. (For detailed treatments of the relation between these two works see Nolin 1968; Ḥaydar 1999.)

Comparing Two Compendia

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī was among the most prolific scholars that Egypt has ever produced (his list of titles numbers more than 600; for the difficulties involved in establishing a secure account of all works see Sartain 1975). Although his family claimed roots in Persia and Mesopotamia, by the time of his birth they were settled in Egypt, especially Assiut/Asyūṭ. Al-Suyūṭī himself was born and educated in Cairo and lived most of his life during the final century of Mamlūk rule.³ Among his extant works is an extended autobiography, *al-Taḥadduth bi ni‘mat Allāh*, that details, in the usual fashion, information about his studies, travels, teaching positions, and other official posts (Sartain 1975; for a literary study of this autobiography see Brustad 1997). It also provides a list of his writings, which he categorizes in an idiosyncratic fashion. He classifies some of his works by length, others by quality. For example, he lists eighteen works which he deems to be unique in the quality of their scholarship and another fifty which are important but not unparalleled.⁴ He also cites forty of his earlier writings that he now considers insufficient and another eighty-three that he started but, for lack of sustained interest, never completed (Sartain 1975: 46–7).

Al-Suyūṭī's predecessor, al-Zarkashī, was also an Egyptian by birth although his family's origins were Turkish. His was not a scholarly pedigree and his designation as al-Zarkashī comes from the craft of brocade embroidery (*zarkasha*), a trade in which his father may have trained him. Nevertheless, he clearly managed to assimilate an extraordinary knowledge of the Qur'ān and its relevant scholarly disciplines. Ibn al-Imād counts his principal teachers as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asnawī (d. 772/1370), Sirāj al-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (d. 805/1403), and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Adhraī (d. 783/1381) and records his educational travels to Damascus, where he studied with Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), and Aleppo. As a professional scholar, he spent his life teaching, delivering legal judgments, and writing on a wide variety of topics ('Abd al-Ḥayy b. 'Imād 1966: V, 335). His biographers depict him as so completely engrossed in his work that the conduct of his worldly affairs was left to relatives. According to one account, he only left his house to visit the book market. There he would spend the day perusing one volume after another, taking notes to use in his writings, and leaving the poor bookseller with no sale to his credit (Ibn Ḥajar 1929–32: III, 398).

Turning now to the summative works of these two scholars, it is important to note that the *Itqān* stands first on al-Suyūṭī's list of the writings on which he most prides himself. A source of that pride is surely the significant advance that he made in the *Itqān* over the work of his esteemed predecessor al-Zarkashī in matters of arrangement and classification. Comparing the structure of the *Itqān* and the *Burhān* demonstrates that the former has achieved a decided improvement in organization. Although the *Itqān* is arranged in eighty consecutive chapters (*anwā'*, sing. *naw'*) with no indication of thematic groupings, it is not too difficult to discern al-Suyūṭī's organizational method. He uses what I would call an increasingly telescopic perspective, beginning with the macro and then moving in closer and closer.⁵ The *Itqān* starts with the fact and process of revelation, taking the Qur'ānic event as a whole in order to analyze it both chronologically and contextually (chapters 1–16). The opening chapter, which explores the fundamental temporal-spatial categories of Meccan and Medinan, is followed by those that categorize passages revealed during the day and during the night, during the summer and during the winter, while Muḥammad was settled or on a journey or in bed.

Al-Suyūṭī then moves to a series of chapters (17–27) that deal with the collection and transmission of the Qur'ān, providing precise detail about the relative reliability of particular forms of conveyance. Having devoted more than a third of his eighty chapters to these macro matters, al-Suyūṭī next turns to the text itself, examining it from four interrelated perspectives: articulation (28–35), lexicology and morphology (36–42), rhetoric (43–58), and textual structure (59–63). The group of chapters on articulation covers the technical specifics of Qur'ānic recitation (*tajwīd*), such as points of pause and resumption (*waqf* and *ibtidā'*), forms of consonantal assimilation (*idghām*, *ikhfā'*, and *iqlāb*), and vowel lengthening or shortening (*madd* and *qasr*). The chapters on lexicology and morphology delve into issues of polysemy and linguistic provenance. For example, two sequential chapters (37 and 38) treat Qur'ānic lexemes that do not occur in the language of the Ḥijāzī Arabs and those that derive from languages other than Arabic.

A long segment that can be broadly described as devoted to the rhetoric of the Qur'ān offers an extended set of semantic binaries. These constitute the most characteristic

feature of *ʿulūm al-Qurʿān*, creating an exegetical taxonomy of multiple, overlapping categorizations. Although the precise significance of several of these terms is a matter of debate, I offer a brief mention of the most important combinations: clear and obscure (*muḥkam wa-mutashābih*), inversion of the natural word order (*taqdīm wa-taʿkhīr*), general and particular (*ʿāmm wa khāṣṣ*), synoptic and explicated (*mujmal wa-mubayyana*), abrogating and abrogated (*nāsikh wa mansūkh*), qualified/restricted and unqualified/unrestricted (*muṭlaq wa muqayyad*), explicit and implicit (*manṭūq wa mafhūm*), literal and figurative (*ḥaqīqa wa-majāz*), comparison and metaphor (*tashbīh wa istiʿāra*), metonymy and allusion (*kināya wa taʾwīd*), concision and prolixity (*ījāz wa itnāb*), informative and performative (*khābar wa inshāʿ*). The last grouping among the four forms of textual dynamics that I have drawn from the *Itqān* is that of textual structure. Here al-Suyūṭī details the beginnings and endings of the *sūras*, the divisions between verses, and the connection (*munāsaba*) to be found between verses and between *sūras*.

Before the final four chapters (77–80) that discuss Qurʿānic commentary and commentators, al-Suyūṭī includes thirteen chapters that are not easily configured as a group (64–76). I am tempted to view this as a kind of expanding appendix to the rest of his work, a place to situate topics that did not fall easily into the groups just discussed. This miscellany ranges from the inimitability (*ijāz*) of the Qurʿān to its orthography (*marṣūm al-khaṭṭ*). Some chapters detail the excellent qualities (*faḍāʾil*) of the Qurʿān while others treat particular genres, such as parables (*amthāl*), oaths (*aqsām*), and passages of debate or dialectic (*jadal*).

The textual architecture that I have drawn from the *Itqān* can be graphed as shown in Figure 33.1.

The significance of al-Suyūṭī’s organizational accomplishment can be better understood when compared to the predecessor text which he extolled in his introduction, that is, al-Zarkashī’s *Burhān*. While most of the same individual topics are treated in this earlier work, no equivalent textual architecture can be discerned. Al-Zarkashī’s work, which contains forty-seven chapters to al-Suyūṭī’s eighty, does include some sequential groupings. For example, chapters 16–20 cover much of what al-Suyūṭī surveys in the chapters I have described as “lexicology and morphology.” Another discernible grouping deals with some of the matters contained in those sections of al-Suyūṭī that I have subtitled as “rhetoric.” But, for the most part, the *Burhān* presents a succession of forty-seven topics with little concern for their ordering or their connection. Of course, it should be noted that chapter titles do not constitute an automatic equivalence between the two works. In other words, some topics to which al-Suyūṭī devotes a separate section are treated as a subcategory by al-Zarkashī and vice versa.

Selecting Some Samples

While comparison of the structures of these two summative works in the sciences of the Qurʿān provides some sense of the major topics addressed in this discipline, the real flavor of the enterprise is found in the details. The range of subtopics is vast, but a small selection may offer some representative examples.

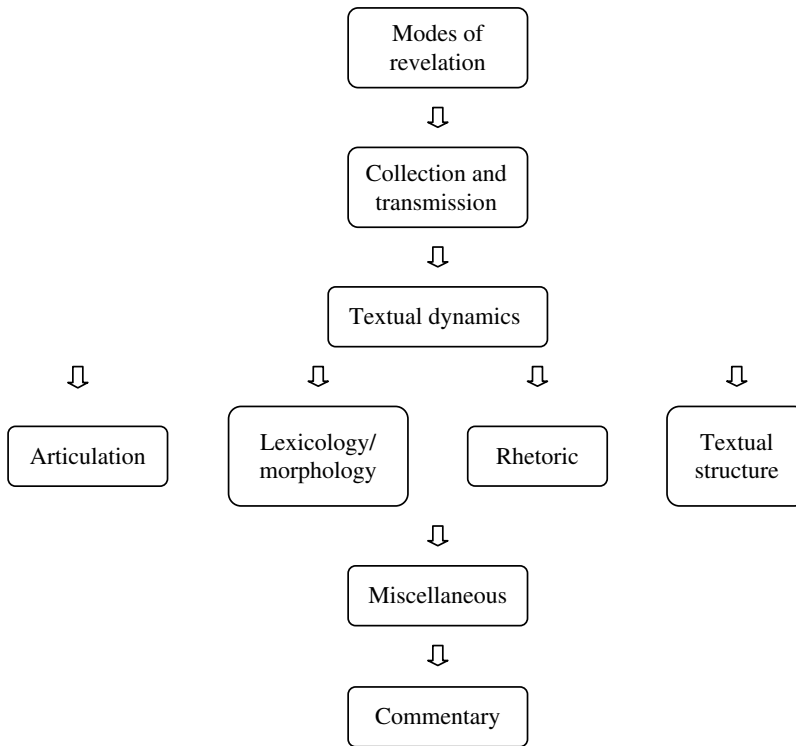


Figure 33.1 Al-Suyūṭī's textual architecture.

Distributed revelation

Among al-Suyūṭī's initial sections, those that treat the modes of revelation, there is a chapter entitled "What was revealed to some of the [earlier] prophets and what was revealed to no one before the prophet [Muḥammad]." These pages of the *Itqān* collect a number of *ḥadīth*, many of which are attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687), a much younger cousin of Muḥammad, who is commonly credited with a formative role in the nascent exegetical tradition. Summarizing the *ḥadīth* relevant to the second half of the chapter's title, al-Suyūṭī counts the first *sūra* (*al-Fātiḥa*), Q 2:255 (which is known as the "Throne verse"), and the final verses of the second *sūra* as those revealed only to Muḥammad. The supporting *ḥadīth* that al-Suyūṭī cites differ about whether the last two or the last three verses of the second *sūra* are to be included. They also place an additional verse in the category. Al-Suyūṭī quotes Abū ʿl-Qāsim al-Ṭabarānī's (d. 360/971) conveyance of a prophetic statement transmitted by Ibn ʿAbbās, "For times of calamity my community has been given something which no other community has been given: 'To God we belong and to him will we return' (Q 2:156)" (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 112). From Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim's (d. 224/838) *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, al-Suyūṭī quotes a statement about verses that were given to Muḥammad but not to Moses and a verse that was given

to Moses but not to Muḥammad. The latter is: “O God, do not let Satan enter our hearts and free us from him so that to you belong the sovereignty, the authority, the power, the dominion, the praise, the earth, the heaven, time everlasting, forever and ever, amen, amen.”

Turning to those Qur’ānic verses that were also revealed to earlier prophets, the cited *ḥadīth* center primarily on Q 87 and Q 53, attesting that these, or their equivalent, could be found in the scriptures (*ṣuḥuf*) of Abraham and Moses. The Qur’ānic warrant for this claim is itself drawn from Q 87:18: “This truly is in the earlier scriptures (*al-ṣuḥuf al-ūlā*)” (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 113–14). Additional citations point to passages from Q 9, Q 23, Q 33, and Q 70. More specifically, a connection is made between the Torah (*Tawrāt*) and several *sūras* of the Qur’ān (Q 6, Q 11, and Q 17). A *ḥadīth* on the authority of Ka’b al-Aḥbar (d. 32/652–3), drawn from Ibn al-Ḍurays’ (d. 294/906) *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*, states that the Torah begins with the initial verses of Q 6, “Praise God who created the heavens and the earth and made the darknesses and light, etc.” – a phrase that is clearly reminiscent of the creation narratives in Genesis – and ends with the final verse of Q 17, “Praise God who does not beget offspring and has no partner in dominion nor any protector because of weakness, so exalt him with glorification.” Variants of this *ḥadīth* associate the Torah’s beginning with Q 6:151–65 and its conclusion with Q 11:123 (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 114).

Counts and curiosities

Moving from contextual to textual considerations, there is a chapter in al-Zarkashī’s *Burhān* which furnishes a fascinating example of the degree of painstaking scrutiny to which classical scholars of the Qur’ān subjected the text. Chapter 14 deals with *sūra* names and enumerations. One part of this discussion devotes itself to numbering the *sūras*, verses, words, and letters of the Qur’ān. The totals vary somewhat for rather complicated reasons, but the entire effort is framed with an attractive narrative. According to this story, the renowned Umayyad governor, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714), gathered the Qur’ān reciters of Baṣra and chose several from among them, including al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), Abū ‘l-‘Āliya (d. 90/708–9), Naṣr b. ‘Āṣim (d. 89/707), ‘Āṣim al-Jaḥḍarī (d. 128/745), and Mālik b. Dīnār (d. 131/748). He then asked those selected to tally the letters of the Qur’ān and that task took them four months, counting with corns of barley. Their final reckoning was: 323,015 letters and 77,439 words (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 249). Other accounts then go on to supply verse totals that vary from 6,104 to 6,236, as well as calculations for the longest *sūra* (Q 2), the longest verse (Q 2:282 at 128 words), the shortest verse (either Q 89:1 or Q 93:1, each a verse of a single word), and even the longest word (*fa’sqaynākumūhu* in Q 15:22; al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 252).

These enumerations are immediately followed by a section that describes the eight halves into which the Qur’ān can be divided. If by *sūras*, the division falls between Q 57 and Q 58; if by verses, between Q 17:45 and Q 17:46; if by words, between the final word in Q 22:20 and the first in Q 22:21; and if by letters, between the first two consonants of the word *nukran* in Q 18:74 (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 253). Then al-Zarkashī

embarked upon a discussion which can only be described as “Qur’ānic *Jeopardy*,” a series of questions and answers such as: How many times does the expression “only to cause strife” (*illā ghurūran*) occur in the Qur’ān? How many verses begin with the letter *shīn*? How many end with it? What is the longest sequentially voweled segment? Additional details tell us that (1) in one *sūra* of the Qur’ān, Q 58, every verse contains the divine name; (2) there is a verse, Q 2:282, that has thirty-three *mīms*; (3) there is a *sūra* of over one hundred verses, Q 12, that makes no mention of either heaven or hell; (4) the letter *kāf* never occurs successively in a word without an intervening letter except in Q 2:200 and Q 5:42 (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 253–5).

Repeal and revocation

Moving now to a more consequential topic among the Qur’ānic sciences, one with legal implications, both al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūfī devote substantial attention in their respective works to the subject of Qur’ānic abrogation. In brief, the doctrine of abrogation asserts that the legal force of some Qur’ānic verses (and some *ḥadīth*) has been replaced by that of others (Burton 1977 and 2001; Rippin 1984; Powers 1988). Treatment of the topic by these two authors is interesting in itself but also offers a good example of the ways in which al-Suyūfī appropriated material virtually wholesale from al-Zarkashī.

Both of their respective chapters begin with a list of earlier authors who have written on this topic and then characterize the subject of abrogation as utterly indispensable for anyone who would attempt interpretation of the Qur’ān (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 28f.; al-Suyūfī 1967: III, 59f.). Al-Suyūfī systematically tackles such matters as (1) the different meanings of the term “abrogation” (*naskh*), (2) the question of whether the Qur’ān can be abrogated only by the Qur’ān or whether it can also be abrogated by the *sunna* (i.e., *ḥadīth*), (3) the kinds of Qur’ānic verses that are capable of abrogating or being abrogated, and (4) different forms of abrogation. Given the penchant for categorization that these summative works display, it is not surprising to find al-Suyūfī dividing all 114 *sūras* of the Qur’ān into four lists: (1) those that contain neither abrogating nor abrogated verses – these number forty-three; (2) those that contain both – twenty-five; (3) those with only abrogating verses – six; and (4) those with only abrogated verses – forty. Further definitions and distinctions precede a listing of abrogated verses. A few samples should provide some sense of how this aspect of Qur’ānic study operates.

In some cases, such as that of Q 8:65, a verse is abrogated by a following verse in the same *sūra*. Whereas Q 8:65 urges believers to fight with the promise that twenty steadfast warriors will overcome a force of two hundred, Q 8:66 modifies the prediction to more realistic odds, that is, two to one. In another example, Q 9:41 urges believers to go forth to war whether they are physically and financially fit to do so or not. (The Arabic terms used to designate these states are “light” and “heavy,” respectively.) Al-Suyūfī then cites several verses, including Q 48:17, Q 9:91, and Q 9:122, that qualify the burden of this divine command. Finally, in a case of marriage legislation, Q 24:3 and its pronouncement that an adulterer can only marry an adulteress is abrogated by

Q 24:32, which offers the more general directive to marry those who are without spouses (al-Suyūṭī 1967: III, 66–8).

Cleanliness and comportment

The rules and etiquette of reciting and handling the Qurʾān provide yet another topic to which both al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī devote long and detailed chapters. The subjects covered include such mundane matters as securing a clean place for recitation – ideally a mosque – and sitting in a quiet, dignified manner with head bowed facing the *qibla*. To emphasize the importance of a respectful posture al-Zarkashī cites a story about the companion Saʿīd b. al-Musayyib al-Makhzūmī (d. 94/713), who was asked, while stretched out in a reclining position, about a certain *ḥadīth*. He immediately sat up and exclaimed, “I abhor relating the *ḥadīth* of God’s messenger while reclining and even more so in the case of God’s speech” (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 459). The preference for ritual ablution (*al-wuḍūʿ*) before recitation is discussed as well as the degree of ritual impurity that would preclude reciting or even touching the Qurʾān. A *ḥadīth* attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib even recommends oral hygiene as an additional preparation of the body that will honor God: “Indeed your mouths are pathways for the Qurʾān so use a tooth stick (*siwāk*) to make them pleasing” (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 296).

Both works deal with the many prescriptions and proscriptions that a session of recitation entails, such as: (1) the importance of forming the proper intention (*niyya*) and of avoiding all carelessness in recitation, (2) the commendability of reciting the Qurʾān aloud, (3) the prayer formulas with which each segment of recitation should commence, (4) the disrespect evidenced by interrupting recitation to engage in conversation, (5) the verses whose recitation is to be accompanied by physical prostration.

One interesting question that both al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī raise in their respective chapters on the “etiquette” of Qurʾān recitation is whether it is better to recite the Qurʾān from memory or by looking at the written text (*muṣḥaf*). Given the importance attached to memorization of the Qurʾān and the respect accorded to those who accomplish it, the response to this question would seem obvious. Yet both authors come down strongly in favor of recitation from the *muṣḥaf*. Al-Zarkashī provides the longer treatment of this issue – it is a topic on which al-Suyūṭī acknowledges his predecessor directly – and cites a number of authorities to support his view, such as Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Muḥyī al-Dīn b. Sharaf al-Nawawī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 676/1277; author of *Kitāb al-tibyān fī ādāb ḥamalāt al-Qurʾān*). The primary reason provided for this preference understands looking at the *muṣḥaf* to be an act of veneration (*ʿibāda*), one that ranks with other such acts like looking at the Kaʿba and gazing upon the faces of one’s parents. He includes statements from Muḥammad that credit recitation from the *muṣḥaf* as meriting twice the divine reward that recitation from memory secures and the same idea of doubling is captured in yet another rationale: since two parts of the body are used, the mouth and the eyes, the greater effort warrants the greater reward. Respect for the physical text seems to underlie an additional reason

given: “Anyone who possesses a copy of the Qur’ān should recite short verses from it every day so as not to leave it unused” (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 463).

The *Burhān* and the *Itqān* both record the competing view, that recitation is best done from memory, but with attribution to only a single source, Abū Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Salām’s (d. 660/1262) *Amālī*. The reason given captures a key element of Qur’ānic practice: meditative reflection (*tadabbur*). Citing Q 38:29, “so that you may reflect upon its verses,” as his proof text, Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām insists that this is best accomplished when one’s eyes are not engaged. Both al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī, however, quote al-Nawawī, who allows for the possibility that this may vary with individuals. What is important is this reflective presence to the divine word, whether that is achieved with eyes on the text or with eyes unengaged (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 468; al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 305).

Ranking revelation

As a final entrant in this selection of subjects that fall within the field of the Qur’ānic sciences, I turn to a topic that raises an interesting theological question, and one that generated considerable discussion and disagreement. This is the question of whether some parts of the Qur’ān are superior to others. Both authors begin their respective chapters on this subject with the views of those who would argue that the inquiry itself is ridiculous – if the entire Qur’ān is God’s speech, how can some parts of it be considered better than other parts? Against this argument, however, stand the hundreds of *ḥadīth* that speak to the merits and distinction of particular verses and *sūras* (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 438–9; al-Suyūṭī 1967: IV, 117–18). Ranged in defense of this latter position are such well-known figures as al-Ghazālī – his *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* (“Jewels of the Qur’ān”) is an important source on this topic, one from which both al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī quote extensively; the Khurāsānī traditionist Iṣḥāq b. Rāhwayh (d. 238/853); and the Andalusian exegetes, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-‘Arabī (d. 543/1148) and Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272).

Representations of the argument center on matters of content and form or semantics and rhetoric. An often cited example is the contrast between Q 112:1, “Say, ‘He is God, One’,” and Q 111:1, “Perish the hands of Abū Lahab and perish he.” Considered from the perspective of content these two verses pit an uncompromising statement of God’s unicity against an especially vehement curse, and many would contend that any discourse about God is inherently superior to any other discourse, particularly a curse. Seen, however, from a formal perspective, those who specialize in Qur’ānic rhetorics (*ilm al-bayān*) could argue that Q 111:1 is a perfectly constructed curse, just as Q 112:1 is a perfectly constructed statement of God’s unicity and uniqueness (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 440).

Among the most frequently lauded *sūras* are Q 1 (*sūrat al-fātiḥa*), Q 112, and Q 36. An example of the kinds of statements cited would be that by al-Ḥasan al-Basrī on the first *sūra*: “God put all the knowledge found in previous [holy] books into the Qur’ān; then he put all the knowledge in the Qur’ān into *sūrat al-fātiḥa*. So whoever knows

its interpretation is like one who knows the interpretation of all the revealed books” (al-Suyūṭī 1967: IV, 120). Individual verses are also noted, especially Q 2:255, the “Throne verse” (*āyat al-kursī*), for its proclamation that God’s “throne extends over the heavens and the earth.” Both al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī raise the question of whether this verse is superior to Q 112 and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s negative response is quoted. That response is built on two premises: (1) *sūras* are more significant than verses and (2) Q 112 managed to convey the entire teaching of God’s unicity in but fifteen words while it took fifty for Q 2:255 to do so (al-Zarkashī 1959: I, 42; al-Suyūṭī 1967: IV, 122).

Al-Zarkashī concludes his chapter on this topic with statements about those Qur’ānic verses that are most hope-inspiring and those that are most fear-inspiring. Al-Suyūṭī takes this over but creates a new chapter for it. While the final quarter of his chapter replicates some of the *Burhān*’s treatment of what I have earlier called “Qur’ānic Jeopardy,” the earlier sections offer such statements as this one from Muḥammad:

Truly the mightiest verse in the Qur’ān is “There is no God but he, the Living, the Sustainer, etc. (Q 2:255),” the most justice-assuring verse in the Qur’ān is “Truly God commands justice and doing good, etc. (Q 16:90),” the most fear-inspiring verse[s] in the Qur’ān is “Whoever does an atom’s weight of good will see it and whoever does an atom’s weight of evil will see it (Q 99:7–8),” and the most hope-inspiring verse in the Qur’ān is “Say, O my worshipers who have committed excesses against themselves, do not despair of God’s mercy, etc. (Q 39:53).” (Al-Suyūṭī 1967: IV, 129; al-Suyūṭī cites this from Abū Dharr al-Harāqī’s [d. 435/1044] *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*)

Al-Suyūṭī then provides fifteen entrants, drawn from a wide variety of sources, in the category of most hope-inspiring verse: Q 39:53; 2:260; 93:5; 4:48; 24:22; 9:102; 46:35; 13:6; 90:15–16; 17:84; 34:17; 20:48; 42:30; 8:38; and 2:282 (al-Suyūṭī 1967: IV, 129–31). The last-mentioned, the “verse of the debt” (*āyat al-dayn*), requires some explanation because rather than being primarily a brief reminder of God’s mercy, it is a long verse about both the necessity and the procedure for recording financial obligations. What connects it to the idea of “hope” is the analogy between the divine diligence in assisting humans with their worldly goods and the great care that God exercises in forgiving them their failings (al-Suyūṭī 1967: IV, 131).

This brief discussion of but a few of the topics in the *Itqān*’s eighty chapters – and their counterparts in the *Burhān* – amounts to just a dip into the vast ocean of the Qur’ānic sciences. It does not begin to address subjects that consumed large portions of these two works, particularly those whose comprehension requires a knowledge of the Arabic language. There are carefully detailed treatments of matters such as the many phonetic variations necessary for the proper recitation of the Qur’ān, the rules for its correct representation and orthography, and the accepted range of its variant readings (*qirā’āt*). Exhaustive examinations of the Qur’ānic lexicon catalogue words of non-Arabic origin, those that are rare and obscure (*gharīb*), and those that carry multiple meanings (*wujūh wa naḥā’ir*). The doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur’ān, which is largely constructed on assertions of its rhetorical superiority, results in minute analysis of all contributing elements of Qur’ānic “eloquence” (*balāgha*). Al-Zarkashī devotes almost one half of his *Burhān* to the many facets of rhetorical classification.

Seeking the Sources

While studying these two summative works – the two *summas* of the Qurʾānic sciences – affords a convenient entry to this vast and complex discipline, it carries the accompanying disadvantage of stepping in midstream, minus the perspective formed by a knowledge of genesis and historical development. All compendia build upon earlier efforts. So it is worth asking how and when the individual topics that eventually constituted the Qurʾānic sciences emerged. Among the questions that a more extensive treatment of this subject – one beyond the scope of this chapter – could explore are: What were some of the formative early efforts and investigations? How did the various, separate subjects within the larger discipline of the Qurʾānic sciences begin to connect? Is it possible to define a point at which the Qurʾānic sciences coalesce as a distinct discipline?

In his citation of sources, al-Suyūṭī himself provides plenty of leads. Most chapters of the *Itqān* begin with a bibliographic nod to some of those who had previously treated a particular topic and with a survey of earlier scholarly opinion about it. Many of al-Suyūṭī's sources themselves represent previous efforts to consolidate elements of this emerging discipline. Retrospective reconstruction must take note of such works but must also push beyond them to the initial stages of all the subtopical elaboration that eventually came together to form the overarching discipline of the Qurʾānic sciences. Clearly, interpretation and study of the Qurʾān were co-extensive with its promulgation. For example, the early works on the life of the Prophet and on the initial expeditions and military campaigns (*sīra* and *maghāzī*) offered material pertinent to such subtopics as “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the designation of *sūras* and verses as Meccan or Medinan, abrogating and abrogated passages, and the interpretation of the Qurʾān. (For relevant titles see *EI2* 2004: “Maghāzī” and “Sīra.”)

Ḥadīth works, especially the Sunnī and Shīʿī canonical collections, are another early source for *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*. The *Ṣaḥīḥs* of both al-Bukhārī and Muslim contain chapters on the interpretation (*tafsīr*) of the Qurʾān and on its “excellences” (*fadāʾil*). The other Sunnī collections, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Māja, al-Tirmidhī, and al-Nisāʾī, are also significant sources, as is the tenth-century compilation by the Shīʿī scholar al-Kulaynī. An additional source that pre-dates the canonical collections is ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī's (d. 211/827) *al-Musannaf*. The *fadāʾil* chapters or sections of these collections themselves combine aspects of the Qurʾānic sciences that would eventually receive individual treatment by later authors or be catalogued separately by al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī (Afsaruddin 2002).

Jurisprudence and the formation of legal hermeneutics represent another emerging Islamic discipline that contributed to the classical elaboration of the Qurʾānic sciences. In his seminal legal treatise, *al-Risāla*, Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) contends, for example, that the Qurʾān contains nothing that is not pure Arabic, offering many Qurʾānic citations to buttress his argument (al-Shāfiʿī 1979: 41–53). He speaks of those verses that have been abrogated by others, using the example of Q 73:1–4 having been abrogated by Q 73:20 (al-Shāfiʿī 1979: 113–17), and explains how verses of general applicability differ from those that are more circumscribed (*al-ʿamm waʾl-khaṣṣ*; al-Shāfiʿī

1979: 53–62). To emphasize his expertise in the Qurʾānic sciences, al-Shāfiʿī’s biographer recounts his interrogation by the caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd. When asked by the caliph, “What do you know about the Book of God,” al-Shāfiʿī responded with a counter-question: “About what area of knowledge [i.e., “science”] do you ask, O Commander of the Faithful?” He then proceeds to list most of the subtopics that have already been mentioned in this chapter as the constitutive elements of the Qurʾānic sciences (al-Bayhaqī 1970–1: I, 131–2).

The emerging sciences of lexicography and grammar also contribute important foundational works to the developing Qurʾānic sciences and are among the sources on which the summative works of al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī draw. Aspects of lexical and grammatical analysis are captured in such early works as Abū ʿUbayda’s (d. 210/825) on the literary expression of the Qurʾān (*Majāz al-Qurʾān*), Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889) on the interpretation of difficult words and passages (*Taʿwīl mushkil al-Qurʾān*), and the work by al-Naḥḥas (d. 338/950) on the Qurʾān’s morphology and grammar (*Iʿrāb al-Qurʾān*).

The final contributing category, and one that proves to be a very fruitful source, is that of exegetical works themselves, particularly their introductions (McAuliffe 1988; Markaz al-Thaqāfa waʾl-Maʿārif al-Qurʾāniyya 1995–7). An important work on the early development of Arabic grammar notes that “*in nuce* the early commentaries contain all elements found in later commentaries but what is more, they also contain the material which at a later stage became a specialized field in different Islamic sciences” (Versteegh 1993: 92). In his *Irshād*, Yāqūt b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229), citing Abū Bakr b. Kāmil (d. 350/961), presents a succinct description and appreciation of the most important Qurʾān commentary of the early classical period, Abū Jaʿfar b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʿwīl āy al-Qurʾān*.⁶ Particular note is made of the “introductory topics” (*muqaddimāt*) with which this exegete prefaced his magnum opus. These include such matters as comparative lexicography/dialectology, the various aspects or modes of interpreting (*wujūh al-taʿwīl*), and *ḥadīth* conveying Muḥammad’s statement about the seven *aḥruf*, a much contested term that has been interpreted to mean such diverse phenomena as dialectical differences in the Arabic of the classical period or levels of interpretive signification. Yāqūt goes on to mention additional matters that al-Ṭabarī’s introduction treats: transmitted accounts that proscribe interpretation based on unformed personal opinion (*al-tafsīr biʾl-raʾy*), the praise or censure of particular early exegetes, the interpretation of the names of the Qurʾān, of its *sūras* and verses, of the prayer formulas that accompany its recitation, etc. (Yāqūt 1907–27: VI, 439–41).

But al-Ṭabarī’s *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* is itself a summative work, one that attempts a comprehensive collation of earlier exegetical efforts.⁷ Moving behind al-Ṭabarī, it is possible to find yet earlier examples of *tafsīr* introductions that treat topics that will eventually coalesce into the Qurʾānic sciences. For instance, the Khūrāsānī scholar Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) deals in two parts of his exegetical introduction with the “modes” or “aspects” (*awjuh*) of the Qurʾān. First he cites the statement: “The Qurʾān was revealed according to five modes (*awjuh*), its command, its prohibition, its promise, its threat and the tales of ancient peoples” (Muqātil b. Sulaymān 1989: I, 26; see

editor's first note on this same page where he indicates that one of the manuscripts lacks this introduction). Paul Nwyia (1970: 67–8) recognized within these five modes three fundamental modalities. The first pair, command and prohibition, represents the realm of literal exegesis while the second, promise and threat, raises eschatological concerns. Finally, the tales of ancient peoples, understood not simply as past history but as instances of divine intervention accomplished through prophetic mediation, open the analogical level.⁸ Later, Muqātil repeats an oft-cited description from Ibn ʿAbbās: “The Qurʾān has four aspects (*awjuh*): *tafsīr* which the learned know, *ʿarabiyya* [i.e., linguistic usages] which the Arabs understand, *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* of which no one is allowed to be ignorant and *taʿwīl* which only God knows” (Muqātil b. Sulaymān 1989: I, 27).⁹ It is worth pausing here, however, to note the difference between this and the previous *awjuh* citation: the earlier citation divides the Qurʾānic material by *contents*, for example into verses that contain commands and prohibitions, or eschatological expectations or axiological narratives. In the latter citation, however, the *awjuh* or “aspects” categorization is not contents but levels or capacities of comprehension. The angle of vision changes here as a focus on identifiable genre gives way to a concern for intellectual grasp.

Already with Muqātil's introduction can be found a number of the binaries that were to become such a characteristic feature of *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* works: the particular and the general, the obscure and the clear, the explicated and the indefinite, the abrogating and the abrogated, inversion of word order, polysemous words and those of univocal significance, and so forth (for somewhat differing readings of this list see Gilliot 1990: 118–19; Goldfeld 1988: 24).

Matters of categorization also mark the partially recovered introduction of the Ibādī theologian and jurist Hūd b. Muḥakkam (d. ca. 280/893 or 290/903; on this author see Gilliot 1997: 179–82). He relates a statement on the authority of Abū ʿl-Dardāʾ al-Anṣārī (d. 32/652) that divides Qurʾānic contents by verse type: “The Qurʾān was revealed according to six [kinds of] verses: a verse that announces good tidings, a verse that issues a warning, a verse [conveying God's] ordinance, a verse that commands you, a verse that forbids you, a verse of stories and accounts” (Hūd b. Muḥakkam 1990: I, 69). He, too, provides a summative statement of Qurʾānic typology: “Only those with knowledge of the following twelve items can understand the interpretation of the Qurʾān: Meccan and Medinan, abrogating and abrogated (*nāsikh* and *mansūkh*), inversion of word order (*taqdīm* and *taʿkhīr*), disconnected and connected verses (*maqṭūʿ* and *mawṣūl*), particular and general (*khāṣṣ wa ʿāmm*), ellipsis (*iḍmār*) and *ʿarabiyya*” (Hūd b. Muḥakkam 1990: I, 71). Again, as in earlier lists of this sort, the rhetorical (e.g., *taqdīm* and *taʿkhīr*), the semantic (e.g., *khāṣṣ* and *ʿāmm*), the linguistic (e.g., *ʿarabiyya*), and the legal (e.g., *nāsikh* and *mansūkh*) are intermingled.

As a final example of the way that *tafsīr* introductions function as a source for the history of the Qurʾānic sciences, I turn to that of the Ṣūfī commentator Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896). Almost a century and a half separates al-Tustarī from Muqātil b. Sulaymān but their origins in the eastern part of the Islamic empire and their common place of death, Baṣra, provide points of geographical connection. The introduction to al-Tustarī's *Tafsīr* is divided into two parts but this division does not entail a strict

segregation of contents. Specific terminology and particular emphases migrate back and forth between the two sections. One theme that emerges even from the initial encomium passages marks the unbreakable connection between understanding and action, between recitation and behavior (al-Tustarī 1911: 2–4). The polarity of *ẓāhir* (external or literal) and *bāṭin* (internal or esoteric) introduces a motif that marks a major hermeneutical orientation within the body of the commentary itself. It first appears amid the inaugural encomiums where the Qurʾān is characterized as that “whose *ẓāhir* is beautiful (*anīq*) and whose *bāṭin* is profound (*ʿamīq*).” Successive presentations link this polarity with the four senses (*maʿānin*) of scripture, with general or specialized comprehension, and with prescription and proscription (*amr* and *nahy*).¹⁰ Use of the Qurʾānic self-description, Q 42:52, “We have made it a light by which we guide whomever we wish of our servants,” combines *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* with another abiding emphasis within this introduction, the references to light both as an attribute of the Qurʾān and as a grace lodged within the heart of the mystic. Several “light” verses are cited and the Qurʾān as a source of illumination provides the means for distinguishing the literal (*ẓāhir*) from the hidden (*bāṭin*).

These three early commentaries, all apparently produced within about a century and a half of each other, provide an interesting sectarian spread (Sunnī, Ibādī, Ṣūfī) and reproduce typological concerns and classifications that had evolved during this time. Linking all three is an abiding concern for categorization, one that would emerge and re-emerge, in ever more finely detailed form as the discipline of Qurʾānic studies moved toward its summative expressions. Taken as a group, these introductions testify to the early appearance of various trajectories of Qurʾānic analysis. The first trajectory concentrates upon creating a typology of genre groups, rhetorical elements, and textual properties within the Qurʾānic text, classifying textual contents from various angles of analysis. The second turns attention from the text to its recipient and assesses the receptive capacities of different classes of readers, acknowledging diversity of both linguistic and intellectual aptitude. A third trajectory recouples the text and its recipient but in a more interactive fashion. Here levels of textual meaning correspond to moral and spiritual qualities or capabilities within the listener, with each side of this polarity understood to be an active site of both engagement and reciprocity. The moral and spiritual acuity of some listeners reaches levels of meaning inaccessible to others. Conversely, the inexhaustible depths of Qurʾānic signification provoke and elicit understandings that only those thus prepared can achieve.

Evolution and Expansion

While the full textual archaeology of the two summative works by al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūfī remains to be done, a sketch of the excavation plan for such an endeavor can be drawn from the genres of early Islamic literature that I have just described. Centuries of development and consolidation contributed to the full classical formulation of the Qurʾānic sciences and that formulation, in turn, has generated its own continuing legacy. In a fashion not unlike that of the centuries-long dissemination of medieval

scholastic theology and philosophy, this legacy has manifested itself as both a curriculum and a literary tradition. I have used the term *summa* to characterize the *Burhān* and the *Itqān*, a term most commonly associated with the medieval masterpiece penned by Thomas Aquinas, the *Summa theologica*.¹¹ Just as that work decisively influenced the church pedagogy of subsequent centuries, so too have these “*summas*” of the Qur’ānic sciences shaped the contours of all future study of the Qur’ān. A quick glance through the modern Arabic textbooks mentioned in the first paragraphs of this chapter will confirm this comment. A similar scan of their English-language counterparts (e.g., von Denffer 1983; Qadhi 1999) will serve the same function. While the structure and arrangement may vary from one to another of these books – as well as the dozens of others like them – all of them replicate significant portions of the classical formulation of the Qur’ānic sciences.

It is not, however, only the curricula of Islamic schools and universities that reproduce, from one generation to the next, the traditional compendia of the Qur’ān sciences. The foundational works of Western scholarship on the Qur’ān have also been built upon this basis. Theodor Nöldeke’s *Geschichte des Qurāns*, a work that remains indispensable for all critical scholarship on the Qur’ān, draws extensively on the *Itqān*, making very frequent and specific citation of it (Nöldeke 1909–38). He constructs, for example, his influential discussion of the chronology of the Qur’ānic *sūras* directly on al-Suyūṭī and his sources with, of course, extensive refinement and variation (Nöldeke 1909–38: I, 58 ff.; cf. Böwering 2001: 320–6). Both the shape and the substance of modern Western scholarship on the Qur’ān remain, in very large measure, tied to the traditional questions, concerns, and categories of its medieval Muslim antecedents (Arkoun 1982: xx–xxv). That scholarship, however, does not operate within the same theological framework as the classical Qur’ānic sciences and its understanding of history, philology, and literary genesis is consequently different. It has also brought some new topics to the table, such as the manuscript tradition of the Qur’ān, the creation of printed editions, and the centuries of translation activity, topics that have now become part of contemporary Muslim teaching and research. Finally, in an intriguing example of cultural dialectic, the work of Western scholars (Arabic *mustashriqūn*, i.e., “Orientalists”) has itself become a subject within the expanded agenda of modern Muslim scholarship on the Qur’ān (McAuliffe 2003: 445–6; Şaghīr 1999; Banī ‘āmir 2004).

Notes

- 1 The plural of “sciences” is important because this field must not be confused with the contemporary, and largely quixotic, quest by some Muslim scholars and scientists to find references in the Qur’ān to current scientific knowledge (Dallal 2004).
- 2 Al-Suyūṭī’s teacher, Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Kāfiyājī (d. 879/1474), also produced a related work with the stated aim of improving upon earlier ones (al-Kāfiyājī 1990: 116–17), but this effort is dismissed by al-Suyūṭī as insufficient (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 4).
- 3 For the educational world of Mamlūk Cairo see Berkey (1992).

- 4 Al-Suyūṭī's penchant for self-adulation has not escaped criticism. While acknowledging the excellence of the *Itqān*, Ignace Goldziher excoriates its author for his "vanity" and "pompous style" (Goldziher 1871). A contemporary biographer, al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497), accused him of what amounts to plagiarism, appropriating the work of others and, with slight alteration, presenting it as his own (Meursinge 1839: 22).
- 5 Trying to organize the eighty chapters of the *Itqān* has tempted other colleagues (see Arkoun 1982: ix; Balhan 2001: 24–9; Gilliot 2005).
- 6 Apparently, al-Ṭabarī's commentary was not widely disseminated in the several centuries immediately succeeding his own and a modern editor of his *tafsīr* has lamented the lack of extant manuscripts. Yet he also points to its use by such subsequent commentators as al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1271), Abū Hayyān al-Gharnāṭī (d. 745/1344), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), al-Suyūṭī, and al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1832) (see the introduction by M. M. Shākir and A. M. Shākir in al-Ṭabarī 1969: I, 13–14).
- 7 It has recently been argued that al-Tha'labī's (d. 427/1035) *al-Kashf wa 'l-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān* was a more important conduit of this early material (Saleh 2004; also see chapter 25 by Saleh in this book). Many post-Ṭabarī commentaries on the Qur'ān are introduced with a discussion of multiple aspects of the Qur'ānic sciences. Of particular note are those of Ibn 'Aṭīyya (d. 541/1147) and Ibn Bistām (see Gilliot 2005), which are published in Jeffery (1954). In fact, al-Suyūṭī's *Itqān* was conceived as an introduction to an unfinished commentary, *Majma' al-bahrayn wa maṭlā' al-badrayn* (al-Suyūṭī 1967: I, 14).
- 8 In commenting on Nwyia's interpretation of this passage, C. Gilliot connects it with al-Ṭabarī's use of a similar statement on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd: "God revealed the Qur'ān according to five *aḥruf*: lawful and unlawful, clear and ambiguous, and parables" (Gilliot 1990: 118).
- 9 John Wansbrough contrasted this rendition with the later one to be found in al-Suyūṭī's *Itqān* (al-Suyūṭī 1967: IV, 188), which uses only the term *tafsīr*, not the polarity of *tafsīr/ta'wīl* (see Wansbrough 1977: 155).
- 10 For the relation of the polarity *zāhir/bāṭin* to the notion of multiple senses (*ma'ānin*) see Böwering (2003: 346–65).
- 11 While the *Burhān* and the *Itqān* express the encyclopedic character of a *summa*, the question and response structure of a work like the *Summa theologica* is closer to that of some Qur'ān commentaries, such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr (Maḥāṭib al-ghayb)*.

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CHAPTER 34

Theology

Binyamin Abrahamov

In introducing the role of the Qur'ān in Islamic theology, this chapter will mainly focus on Sunnī medieval Islam, although references to sectarian groups and Shī'ī Islam will be adduced. First, I shall examine the Qur'ān as a book containing theological ideas. Then the question of whether the Qur'ān serves as a stimulus to theological discussions will be dealt with. Approaching Islamic theology through its traditional and rational trends will serve to function as a preliminary section for discussion of the various appearances of the Qur'ān in Islamic theology. We shall see that the more rationalist a theologian is, the more he uses the Qur'ān as corroboration and not a departure for his proofs. On the other hand the traditionalist employs the Qur'ān as the basis for his theological theses, but often replaces the Qur'ān by traditions which come to the fore. The discussion here is not historical, but rather phenomenological; that is, I am outlining the place of the Qur'ān within the main streams in Muslim theology. However, one cannot escape the impression that at its beginning, Muslim theology dealt more extensively with interpretations of the Qur'ān, and in its later phases somewhat neglected the Qur'ān in favor of the *sunna* on the one hand, and reason on the other. In the present chapter I have concentrated on the role of the Qur'ān in theological discussions setting aside certain issues such as the Qur'ān as a miracle (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*), which may testify to the theologians' estimation of the scripture but not to their true attitude to it as a theological device. Finally, the presentation here is not exhaustive; it only indicates the main directions taken by Muslim theologians regarding the use of the Qur'ān.

Theology in the Qurʾān

Prophets are not theologians; their teachings are not arranged systematically as are theological treatises (Goldziher 1981: 67). However, the Qurʾān contains many theological notions expressed both explicitly and implicitly. The main tenets of Islam are scattered throughout the Qurʾān in the long and short *sūras*. These dogmas, as a rule, are stated rather than proved. The existence of God who created the world (Q 6:1) constitutes the foundation of the theology in the Qurʾān. God is depicted, *inter alia*, as Living (*ḥayy*), Eternal (*qayyūm*), Omniscient (*ʿalīm*), and Omnipotent (*qadīr*) (Q 2:20, 29, 255). God acts for the benefit of human beings; He supplies them with sustenance and water and designs nature so that they can find their way in the earth (Q 6:95–9).¹ God’s unity is stated in two ways: the positive (“He is God, the One,” Q 112:4) and the negative (“There is no god but He,” Q 2:163). Sometimes in the context of God’s unity the Qurʾān inserts a polemic against Christianity: “Those who say that God is the third of three, whereas there is no god but He, are unbelievers” (Q 5:73).

The Qurʾān applies expressions to God which when taken literally are anthropomorphisms. God is described as sitting on the Throne (Q 20:5), as having a face (Q 55:27), hands (Q 38:75), eyes (Q 54:14), and as speaking to human beings (Q 2:253). Other verses, which contradict the anthropomorphic phrases, express the idea that there is no one equal to God (Q 112:4) and that “there is nothing like Him” (Q 42:11).

On the question of man’s free choice, the literal text of the Qurʾān is equivocal in the same manner. On the one hand, man can choose his acts freely without God’s intervention, while on the other, he is strictly coerced to act because of God’s decree or predestination. Contrary to Q 18:29: “Whoever wills let him believe and whoever wills let him disbelieve” stands Q 76:30: “You will not unless God wills.” The notion that human beings are completely subject to God’s rule and power contradicts the notion of human responsibility based on man’s free choice. In addition to the idea of God’s omnipotence and will to which human beings are subject, the Qurʾān speaks of God’s guidance (*hudā*) and leading astray (*ḍalāl*) in two different manners: Either God guides a man or leads him astray before he acts, which implies predetermination, or He does so after a man acts, meaning that He rewards or punishes him. These two terms and others, such as God’s giving sustenance (*rizq*) or sealing man’s heart (*khatm*) so that he cannot understand God’s admonitions and as a result disbelieves, together with *ajal* (the appointed time of death – Q 6:2), *kasb* (acquisition – Q 2:286), and *ʿadl* (justice – Q 16:90), play a great role in later theological discussions about free will and predestination (Watt 1948: 12–17).

Numerous instances of the verbs *āmana* (he believed) and *kafara* (he disbelieved) and their derivatives occur in the Qurʾān. However, the Qurʾān provides us with no definition of either belief (*īmān*) or disbelief (*kufṛ*). Only once are we told that a difference exists between belief and *islām*:

The Bedouins say: “We believe” (*āmannā*). Say: “You do not believe, but say: ‘We surrender’ (*aslamnā*), for belief has not yet entered your hearts.” (Q 49:14)

Here the verb *aslamnā* seems to convey the formal acceptance of Islam, whereas *īmān* (belief) is connected with a feeling of the heart. This feeling may increase owing to God's acts (Q 3:173; 48:4; 74:31). The worst form of unbelief is to ascribe partners to God (*shirk*), which is a sin He will not pardon (Q 4:116).

The content of belief is mentioned many times. One must believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the resurrection (Q 2:62, 285). According to the Qur'an the unbelievers will enter hell and the believers will enter paradise (Q 4:116–24). In this world, the believers must shun the unbelievers; they should not become the latter's friends and they should fight against them (Q 3:28; 9:1–5, 36).

The verb *fasaqa 'an* means to transgress God's orders, meaning to sin. Satan was ordered to prostrate himself before Adam and "he transgressed God's command (*fasaqa 'an amr rabbihi*)" (Q 18:50). The derivatives of this verb are sometimes related to belief and unbelief: "Is the believer (*mu'min*) like the unbeliever (*fāsiq*)? They are not equal" (Q 32:18). Two types of sins are mentioned in the Qur'an: minor sins (*ṣaghīra*; plural *ṣaghā'ir*) and grave sins (*kabīra*; plural *kabā'ir* – Q 18:49; 42:37). Also here we do not know what sins are subsumed under either *kabā'ir* or *ṣaghā'ir*. As in other theological notions and terms, this lacuna is expanded by the theologians.

The Qur'an as Stimulus to Theological Discussions

Besides the above-mentioned list of theological ideas and terms in the Qur'an, two additional factors have motivated the development of theology in Islam.² The first is the polemics between God and human beings and between prophets and their peoples. God provided Abraham with an argument so that he could refute his people. "That is our argument. We gave it to Abraham against his folk" (Q 6:83). Likewise, a debate occurred between Muhammad and his people: "And those who argue [against the prophet] concerning God³ after he [the prophet] has been known [as prophet], their argument is invalid in God's eyes" (Q 42:16). The notion that human beings cannot refute God after His sending of messengers to mankind is best exemplified in the following verse: "[We have sent] messengers to announce [God's reward for the believers] and to warn [them of God's punishment to the evil-doers] in order that human beings might have no argument against God after [His sending of] messengers" (Q 4:165). Moreover, Muhammad is ordered to call people to the religion by certain means including disputation: "Call to the way of your Lord by [using] wisdom, good exhortation, and dispute with them in the better way" (Q 6:125). In like manner, he must dispute the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) in the better way (Q 29:46).

Having spoken in general of the Qur'an's use of arguments, we now proceed to some specific arguments. One of the most repeated themes in the Qur'an is the resurrection (called, among other names, *al-qiyaama*: see *EI2* 2004: "ḳiyāma"). The Arab pagans believed that God created the heavens and the earth (Q 29:61), but did not believe in the resurrection. They asked: "Who shall restore us to life? Say: 'He who created you at the first time'" (Q 17:51). Here the Qur'an uses an *a fortiori* argument, namely, if the pagans believe in the greatest work of God, that being the creation of the world, then they should believe

in a lesser work of God, that is, the resurrection (cf. Q 75:37–40). Similarly, a syllogism is made between God's revivification of the earth by water and the resurrection (Q 35:9).

In opposition to the pagans and Christians (according to the Qur'ān the latter believed in three divinities), the Qur'ān puts forward an argument later known as *dalīl al-tamānu'* (the argument from mutual hypothetical prevention – see below) to prove God's unity. It reads: "If there were in the heavens and the earth gods other than God, they [the heavens and the earth] would be ruined" (Q 21:22). In another formulation of this argument clearly directed towards the Christians, the Qur'ān states: "God has not taken to Himself any son, nor is there any god with Him, [if it were so], then each god would take off what he created and some of them would rise up over others" (Q 23:91). Thus the state of a stable world proves its being ruled and directed by the one God.

Every Muslim unquestioningly regards the Qur'ān as the realization of the absolute truth. However, contradictions in central issues discussed above, such as anthropomorphism vis-à-vis its negation, urged Muslims to find solutions to these inconsistencies which might impair the perception of the Qur'ān's perfection. The arguable condition of the Qur'ānic text has been one of the major internal stimuli for the emergence of Islamic theology and the attempt to create through interpretation and theological discussion a coherent doctrine.

To sum up, the Qur'ān provides Muslims with theological notions, terms, forms of arguments, and models of debates. To some extent, these elements have affected the Qur'ān's position in Islamic theology.

Types of Theology

The role of the Qur'ān in Islamic theology can be best apprehended through examination of the different theological trends in Islam. The categorization of this theology as it relates to reason and the *sunna* may lead us to lucid conclusions, because Muslim theologians naturally cite Qur'ānic verses which affirm their position vis-à-vis these two sources of knowledge. Along broad lines, it is possible to differentiate between rationalist and traditionalist theologians. By rationalist theologians I mean thinkers who rely on reason as their sole argument in theological discussion and who prefer reason to the Qur'ān in cases of contradiction between the two. (In the broader context of rationalism versus traditionalism, we may add to the Qur'ān the *sunna* and *ijmā'*, the consensus either of religious experts or of all Muslims.) Of course, a purely rationalist theologian, that is, a theologian who employs only rational arguments without any reference to the Qur'ān, cannot be reckoned as a Muslim; therefore, when I speak of rationalist theologians I mean those who base their theological arguments, mainly but not exclusively, on reason. In Islamic theology the most radical of the rationalists were the Mu'tazila.⁴ The traditionalists, on the other hand, rely first and foremost on the Qur'ān, the *sunna*, and the consensus as their basis of theology. Here we can distinguish between pure traditionalism, which means sole dependence on these sources, and other forms of traditionalism which move from the extreme towards reason. However, reason cannot serve them as a point of departure, but only as corroboration (Abrahamov 1998: vii–xi).

Traditionalist theology

Among the traditionalists a distinction is made between the speculative theologians, who are called *mutakallimū⁵ ahl al-ḥadīth* (the speculative theologians of the people of the *ḥadīth*; Ibn ‘Asākir 1984: 105), and those who do not employ speculative theology. The latter sometimes prefer the tradition (*sunna*) to the Qur’ān. I shall now introduce examples showing how the Qur’ān was utilized among these previously mentioned groups. As I have said, the materials are not arranged historically but phenomenologically. The discussion here begins with the traditionalists and ends with the rationalists.

First, it is important to realize that the traditionalists were aware of the Qur’ān’s inadequacy to supply believers with both legal and theological solutions. The traditionalist theologian al-Ājurri (d. 360/970) declares one who accepts only what is found in the Qur’ān an evil man. All God’s ordinances are known only through the messenger’s traditions. The Qur’ān’s status is equal to that of the *sunna*, a comparison that is proved through Q 4:59: “If you dispute about any matter, refer it to God and the messenger.” A tradition brought forward by al-Ājurri explains that “to God” means to God’s book, while “the messenger” means to the messenger’s traditions. Here, a Qur’ānic verse legitimizes the equal status of the *sunna* and the Qur’ān (al-Ājurri 1983: 49–53; cf. Abrahamov 1998: 3–4).

Notwithstanding the comparison between the Qur’ān and the *sunna*, the Qur’ān is elevated to the position of uncreated being (*al-Qur’ān ghayr makhliūq*), because it is God’s speech (*kalām*) or knowledge (*ilm*), which are God’s eternal attributes (al-Ājurri 1983: 75–6). In the chapter dealing with this issue, most of the materials cited by al-Ājurri are traditions, and the few Qur’ān verses he quotes are interpreted according to traditions. One of these few is Q 7:54: “Verily, to Him belong the creation and the command.” The creation is interpreted to mean God’s created things, and the command is the Qur’ān itself, which is not reckoned among the created things.

When the Qur’ān provides verses supporting the author’s thesis, he cites them all. Al-Ājurri expresses the usual traditionalist dogma concerning the elements of faith. Faith is composed of three principal parts: (a) the belief in the heart (*al-taṣdīq bi’l-qalb*); (b) the affirmation of God’s unity and Muḥammad’s mission by uttering the *shahāda*; and (c) carrying out God’s precepts. Al-Ājurri refutes those who hold only the first two roots of faith,⁶ by citing fifty-six verses which prove that fulfilling God’s commands is a requisite for faith. The verses are quoted almost without comment, which creates the impression that the author regards the Qur’ān as a theological source that needs no interpretation. In this case, al-Ājurri is right, for these verses connect belief with the doing of good deeds; see, for example, Q 4:57, 122; 7:42; 14:23; 18:30; and 20:82.

However, in contradistinction to his treatment of faith, when dealing with the problem of predestination and free will, al-Ājurri is very careful to select verses which fit his doctrine of predestination, which is very probably dictated by the traditions. Here (al-Ājurri 1983: 149–68) we cannot speak of Qur’ānic theology, but rather of a theology that seeks corroboration from the Qur’ān. Thus, verses which teach that God puts a seal on one’s heart, ears, and eyes so that one is unable to hear God’s message and hence

unable to believe are cited (Q 2:6–7; 4:155; 5:41). Likewise, the author cites verses dealing with God's guidance and leading astray (*al-hudā, al-dalāl* – Q 4:88; 6:39, 149; 7:186). In his view, God guides and leads human beings astray from the beginning; thus, whomever God leads astray is incapable of believing in Him. Conversely no attempt is made to interpret other verses (Q 2:26; 14:27; 40:74) which suggest God's leading astray as a punishment for man's unbelief or evil-doing. For example, Q 14:27 reads: "God leads astray the wrong-doers," which may imply that leading astray is a reaction to transgression of the laws. Like many other traditionalists, who base their theology on the Qur'ān, al-Ājurri holds that everything depends on God's will, even man's will: "You do not will unless God wills" (Q 81:29).

Some theological dogmas are plainly dictated by the Qur'ān, and the relevant traditions are cited in support of these. This is the case with man's seeing of God, regarded by all Muslims as the highest reward that God will give human beings in the hereafter (al-Ājurri 1983: 251–76). The cornerstone of this doctrine is Q 75:22–3: "On that day (on the resurrection) faces shall be luminous looking at their Lord" (*ilā rabbihā nāzira*). This verse is accompanied with other less lucid verses and with many traditions to the same effect. Contrary to his treatment of predestination, here, al-Ājurri willingly refers to a verse whose plain meaning may refute the present doctrine: "The eyes [literally: the glances – *al-abṣār*] do not perceive Him, and He perceives the eyes" (Q 6:103). Rationalist thinkers, such as the Jahmites⁷ and the Mu'tazilites, use this verse to claim that it is impossible to see God. Al-Ājurri, however, interprets the verb "he perceived" to mean "he encompassed a thing by seeing," meaning "he saw the whole thing," just as one says "I saw the sea," but he did not see the whole sea (al-Ājurri 1983: 276). Accordingly, the Qur'ān teaches us that one cannot see God as a whole, but only part of Him. Here, the author uses a lexical device to interpret a verse and hence to solve a theological problem.

Another means used by the traditionalists to understand a Qur'ānic verse is called *istinbāt* (literally: finding, discovery). Here, the interpretation of a verse is based on reason (al-Jurjāni 1978: 22). One of the most often cited verses in the long-running dispute over the creation of the Qur'ān⁸ is Q 36:82: "His order, when He wills a thing, is only to say to it 'be' and it is." Everything is created through the creation word "be" uttered by God. Now, if this word is also created, it follows that there will be an endless chain of creations, which is an absurdity. Hence, "be," God's speech, is not created, which proves that the Qur'ān, God's speech, is uncreated (al-Lālakā'i 1990: I, 217–18). I call this process an act of rationality, to be differentiated from rationalism, since the theological conclusion or proof is derived on the basis of the Qur'ān, but only with reasoning. In rationalism the basis is reason, and the Qur'ān, if it is involved in the process, plays only a role of corroboration.

Another theology dominated by traditions is that of the Shāfi'ite traditionalist theologian al-Lālakā'i (d. 418/1027). Although he uses *istinbāt*, his theology is largely dominated by traditions. His discussion of predestination (al-Lālakā'i 1990: II, 577–8) begins with a list of relevant verses and a few interpretive notes, but the whole section is devoted to traditions. Sometimes, for example, in the section treating the Murji'ites (al-Lālakā'i 1990: III, 986–1007), there are no quotations from the Qur'ān, though the author could have cited some relevant verses. Thus the Qur'ān is replaced by traditions.

In his *al-Radd 'alā al-zanādiqa wa'l-jahmiyya* ("The Refutation of the Heretics and the Jahmiyya"), Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), after whom the Ḥanbalite school is named, refutes Jahm b. Ṣafwān by using Qur'ānic verses through the method of *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān*, meaning the interpretation of Qur'ānic verses by other Qur'ānic verses. One may assume that this form of argumentation is employed because his adversary uses Qur'ānic verses to support his own theses. Hence, our author is forced to use the same weapon. In the above-mentioned work Ibn Ḥanbal's theology is expressed through the plain meaning of the Qur'ān. This attitude can be best summarized by Ibn Ḥanbal's sentence, which is brought after introducing certain verses (for example, Q 2:255; 7:54; 16:50) regarding God's abode: "This is God's report in which He informs us that He is in the heaven" (al-Nashshār and al-Ṭālibī 1971: 93). Also in *al-Ikhtilāf fī'l-lafẓ wa'l-radd 'alā 'l-Jahmiyya wa'l-mushabbihā* ("The Controversy Concerning the Utterance [of the Qur'ān]⁹ and the Refutation of the Jahmiyya and the Anthropomorphists") written by the traditionalist theologian Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), the dependence on the Qur'ān in the refutation is dictated by the Qur'ānic arguments of the opponent (al-Nashshār and al-Ṭālibī 1971: 233).

In his *al-Radd 'alā al-Jahmiyya* ("The Refutation of the Jahmites"), the traditionalist theologian Abū Sa'īd al-Dārimī (d. 280/893) discusses the Qur'ānic verses in a rational way. Rejoining to the Jahmites' dogma that God is everywhere, meaning that He rules every place, al-Dārimī asks what is then the meaning of God's particularization of the throne among all other places, to which the Jahmites have no answer. This proves their doctrine to be untenable. An argument from disjunction which follows shows that al-Dārimī may be considered among the speculative theologians in the traditionalist circles (*mutakallimū ahl al-ḥadīth*). Notwithstanding, he asks the Jahmites to prove their dogma in the following order: first, proofs from the Qur'ān, then from the tradition, and then from the consensus of the Muslims. The Jahmites claim that they seek to argue on the basis of Qur'ānic verses alone without resorting to the exegetes' interpretations, to which al-Dārimī responds that they should pay attention to the whole verse and not only to phrases taken out of context. In doing so, the argument of the Qur'ān is deeper and clearer than other arguments (al-Nashshār and al-Ṭālibī 1971: 268–70). Thus al-Dārimī plainly states that the Qur'ān furnishes the best argument in theological debates. A further development of this notion considered the Qur'ān the origin of rational arguments.

The approach regarding the Qur'ān as a source of both rational arguments and theological terms was further expanded among certain later traditionalists, mainly speculative theologians. The first was Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935), the eponym of the Ash'arite school of theology. Though first a Mu'tazilite thinker, he later converted to traditionalism and defended Ibn Ḥanbal's theses through speculative arguments. His *Risālat istiḥsān al-khawḍ fī 'ilm al-kalām* ("An Epistle Concerning the Approval of Dealing with the Science of the Speculative Theology"; al-Ash'arī 1953: 87–97) refutes the claim that the Qur'ān and the *sunna* are devoid of speculative theology. Al-Ash'arī sets out the principle that the Qur'ān and the *sunna* contain the roots of this kind of theology in a general way. For our purpose we shall deal only with the Qur'ān.

Al-Ash'arī refers to the four modes of being (*kawn*; plural *akwān*): movement (*ḥaraka*), immobility (*sukūn*), combination (*ijtimā'*), and separation (*iftirāq*). These constitute a genus of accidents which must inhere in the substances (Peters 1976: 128–32; Gimaret 1990: 99–120). According to al-Ash'arī, it is possible to learn about the accident of movement from the story of Abraham (Q 6:76–9) who intermittently declared the star, the moon, and the sun to be his Lord, but after seeing their disappearances and being aware of their movements from place to place, he believed in God, because it is inconceivable for God to disappear and to move from place to place (al-Ash'arī 1953: 89).

Likewise the proof from hypothetical mutual prevention (*dalīl al-tamānu'* – see above) for God's unity is founded on Qur'ānic verses (Q 13:16; 21:22; 23:91) which teach that the existence of more than one god would ruin the world. The possibility of the resurrection is proved in the Qur'ān through verses (Q 7:29; 30:27; 36:79) that assert that if God was able to create the world from nothing, it is far easier for Him to vivify the dead (al-Ash'arī 1953: 89–91).

Those who denied God's creation of the world and the second creation, namely, the resurrection, and believed in the eternity of the world, introduced a false argument against the resurrection. Basing themselves on the law of contradiction, they argued that life is characterized by humidity and heat, while death is defined by coldness and dryness. Thus how can these contradictory elements be brought together in one place? Al-Ash'arī admitted that two opposites cannot be combined in one substrate; however, they can exist in two substrates by way of vicinity. This he learns from Q 36:80, which reads: "God created for you fire out of the green tree so that you can kindle from it." Consequently, it is proved that fire, which is characterized by heat and dryness, comes out of the green tree characterized by coldness and humidity. This further demonstrates that life may come after death (al-Ash'arī 1953: 91). It seems that here al-Ash'arī points to the fact not only that the Qur'ān puts forth theological arguments, but also that the Qur'ān anticipates the claims of the opponents of Islam.

Another principle, which pertains to the doctrine of atoms, states that every body has an end and that an atom (*juz'*)¹⁰ cannot be divided. This is proved on the basis of Q 36:12: "We have counted every thing in a clear register." Al-Ash'arī concludes that it is impossible to count that which is endless or that which is divisible *ad infinitum* (al-Ash'arī 1953: 92–3).

In sum, al-Ash'arī turned the Qur'ān into the essential foundation of theological terms and speculative arguments and in so doing paved the way towards the elaboration of the notion that there is no contradiction between reason and revelation, for revelation includes the principles of the rational arguments.

A similar approach to rational arguments and hence to the Qur'ān was advanced by Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), a contemporary of al-Ash'arī and the eponym of the Māturīdīte school of theology (on this school see *EI2* 2004: "al-Māturīdiyya"). He states that religion is known through rational proofs (Abrahamov 1998: 86n.). For example, a man is recognized as a true prophet first by an examination of his character and then through sensual and rational proofs. For all these proofs, in al-Māturīdī's view, the Qur'ān supplies the Muslims with pieces of evidence (al-Māturīdī 1970: 202–10).

The Zāhirī¹¹ theologian, jurist, and heresiographer Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) also advocates the use of reason in religious matters including theology. But this use is subject to the teachings of the Qurʾān; otherwise, rational arguments are nothing but personal preferences of theologians and philosophers. The Qurʾān explains everything which pertains to religion, as Q 16:89 testifies: “We have revealed to you the scripture explaining all things.” Thus, for example, contrary to the Ashʿarites who derive some of God’s names from His characteristics, Ibn Ḥazm permits only the use of the names and attributes of God which occur in the Qurʾān (EI2 2004: “Ibn Ḥazm”). Clearly, the Qurʾān plays a central role in Ibn Ḥazm’s theology.

The Qurʾān also occupies a high place in al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) Ashʿarite theology, although he introduced Greek logic into Islamic theology. How did he reconcile these two seemingly opposed sources of knowledge? Probably following al-Ashʿarī, al-Ghazālī continues to elaborate the notion that the Qurʾān is the basis of rational arguments. In al-Ghazālī’s view expressed in his *al-Qistās al-mustaqīm* (“The Just Balance”), God is the first teacher, the second is Jibrīl (Gabriel, the conveyer of revelation), and the third is the messenger. By God and Jibrīl he means the teachings of the Qurʾān, and by the messenger, the teachings of the *sunna*. However, his treatment of the subject is more detailed, technical, and sophisticated than that of al-Ashʿarī, for he seeks to prove that the three Aristotelian figures of syllogism and the two Stoic conjunctive and disjunctive syllogisms are found in the Qurʾān (Marmura 1975: 102; Abrahamov 1993a: 145). Each syllogism is called a “balance” (*qistās*) because by these devices one can weigh the true knowledge.

As an example let us take the first figure of syllogism in Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*, I, 3 (McKeon 1941: 68). Al-Ghazālī calls it the “great balance of the equality balances” (*al-mīzān al-akbar min mawāzīn al-taʿādul*), and along with the middle balance (*al-mīzān al-awsaṭ*) and the small balance (*al-mīzān al-aṣghar*), they constitute the three Aristotelian figures of syllogism. According to al-Ghazālī, Abraham used this kind of syllogism when disputing with Nimrūd, who declared that, like God, he gives life and causes death. Consequently, Abraham said to him: “God causes the sun to rise from the east, so bring it from the west” (Q 2:258). On the basis of this verse al-Ghazālī builds his syllogism in the following way: (a) Every being which is capable of making the sun rise is God; (b) My god is capable of making the sun rise; and the conclusion is (c) My god is God. The first premise is known through the agreement of all people that God is able to do everything, including making the sun rise. We know the second premise by seeing that Nimrūd and all other beings are incapable of making the sun rise (al-Ghazālī 1996: 184–5). Thus, the Qurʾān appears in al-Ghazālī’s teaching not only as a source of arguments, but also as a source of logic, as a balance through which one weighs the truth.

The famous Ḥanbalite jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) expresses a similar attitude towards the Qurʾān. In his view, *ʿaqliyyāt* (proofs known through reason) can be derived from the Qurʾān and the *sunna*. The Qurʾān points at, draws one’s attention to, and explains rational arguments, although some rational proofs can be known through observation (Ibn Taymiyya 1979: I, 199f.; Abrahamov 1992: 267).

Later Ashʿarite *mutakallimūn* reveal different approaches to the Qurʾān. In his *Ghāyat al-marām fī ʿilm al-kalām* (“The Utmost Aspiration in the Science of Kalām”), the Ashʿarite *mutakallim* Sayf al-Dīn al-ʿAmidī (d. 631/1233), being greatly influenced by philosophy, almost ignores the Qurʾān. It is highly surprising to see whole chapters dealing with

religious issues such as man's seeing of God in the hereafter (al-Āmidī 1971: 159–78) or prophecy and miracles (al-Āmidī 1971: 317–40) accompanied by very few verses which serve only as support, not as a point of departure. However, in another *kalām* work, which is the basis of *Ghāyat al-marām*, entitled *Abkār al-afkār* ("The First Thoughts"), he employs Qur'ānic proofs (al-Āmidī 1971: 16).

Contrary to al-Āmidī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), an Ash'arite theologian also known for his command of philosophy, continues to maintain the high place of the Qur'ān in his writings. However, Qur'ānic proofs occupy the secondary place in his discussion, for example, on the issue of God's creation of man's acts,¹² while rational proofs appear foremost in this discussion (al-Rāzī 1987: IX, 19–198).

Al-Rāzī substantiates his hierarchy of proofs stating that verbal proofs, meaning those which stem from the Qur'ānic text, do not provide us with certainty, and on the issue of who creates man's acts one must have certainty. Hence, it is forbidden to base the resolution of this question on traditional proofs. He further explains that verbal proofs are based on ten matters and that each of these is probable; hence, that which is based on a probable matter is probable. The very characteristics of the language of the Qur'ān, states al-Rāzī, prevent the possibility of attaining certainty. For example, the Qur'ān is full of omissions and concealed contents, thus a positive statement may turn into a negative one and vice versa. The absence of omissions and concealed contents is also probable. Probability also results from the possibility of various meanings of words.

Special attention should be paid to the question of the contradiction between Qur'ānic verses and reason. Al-Rāzī illustrates one such contradiction by pointing to the anthropomorphic phrases in the Qur'ān.¹³ In such a case, one should use reason to overcome the *sunna*. Reason is the basis of the *sunna*, because one cannot believe in the *sunna* unless one uses rational proofs. In the present issue the solution is to figuratively interpret the anthropomorphic verses.

In sum, al-Rāzī considers the Qur'ān a weak device for attaining certainty with regard to theological problems in general and on the issue of predestination in particular. However, he disapproves of the claim that the Qur'ān is defamed because of contradictory verses regarding the issue of predestination (some of which defend man's choice as opposed to others which defend God's predetermination). The Qur'ān may contain plain meaning (*ḥaqīqa*) as well as figurative speech (*majāz*), and the way to solve the problem of contradictory statements is to use *majāz* (al-Rāzī 1987: IX, 113–33). Also he defends the division of the Qur'ān into self-evident verses (*muḥkamāt*) and ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) as we are informed in Q 3:7, arguing that such a division motivates learning and the use of rational proofs and supplies all ideological systems in Islam with Qur'ānic support for their tenets (al-Rāzī 1987: VII, 172).

Rationalist theology

It seems that like other later Ash'arites, al-Rāzī adopted the rationalist approach of the philosophers or of the Mu'tazila. The latter were the first adherents of rationalism in Islam. Their rationalism is expressed by the notion that God and the world can be examined through the intellect which God creates in human beings. One can know

God's existence, His unity and attributes, through reason. Likewise, one is capable of understanding the creation and structure of the world and man and his actions. Consequently, they hold that the world is directed according to rational rules and that even God is subject to these rules. Contrary to the traditionalists' perception, the rationalist approach holds it quite possible to know God without the support of the Qur'an (Abrahamov 1998: 32).

The Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 414–16/1023–5) wrote a treatise entitled *Faql al-ītizāl wa-ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila* ("The Superiority of the Mu'tazilites and their Biographies") in which he expounds the rationalist approach. Surprisingly enough, but not uncommon, as we shall see, among the Mu'tazilites, he begins his discussion of man's best way to knowledge by citing Q 6:153: "This is my straight path, so follow it and do not follow [other] paths lest they cause you to divert from His path." Since, says 'Abd al-Jabbār, the straight path is not known through seeing, it is incumbent on man to follow proofs and to speculate on them in order to know. Following this verse, he states that there is only one way to true knowledge, while ignorance has infinite ways to express itself. Although our author is a master of rationalism, he bases his doctrine of one true path on the Qur'an. However, the first proof in 'Abd al-Jabbār's view is the rational proof, because through this form of reason one can distinguish between good and evil and know that the Qur'an, the *sunna*, and the consensus are proofs. We know through reason, says 'Abd al-Jabbār, that God exists, that He is one, that He is wise, and that He sent messengers to mankind with miracles. Through this knowledge we know that the messenger's statements are proofs, meaning that the *sunna* is right, and the *sunna* in turn legitimizes the consensus ('Abd al-Jabbār 1986: 138–9).

Notwithstanding the placing of reason as the first proof, the Mu'tazilites did not neglect the Qur'an as the base of their doctrines. Mānkḍīm (d. 425/1034), a Zaydite¹⁴ commentator of 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Kitāb al-uṣūl al-khamsa* ("The Book of the Five Principles"), states in his *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*¹⁵ ("The Interpretation of the Five Principles") that, concerning the issue of seeing God, it is possible to draw conclusions from both reason and revelation (*ʿaql* and *samʿ*), because the soundness of revelation does not depend on this issue. According to Mānkḍīm's rule, it is allowed to prove each theological issue through revelation provided that the soundness of revelation does not depend on this issue ('Abd al-Jabbār 1965: 233). The soundness of prophecy ('Abd al-Jabbār 1965: 563–6), for example, cannot be based on revelation, because this would entail a vicious circle.

The Mu'tazilites' high estimation of the Qur'an is further evidenced in their exhaustive treatments of the miracle of the Qur'an (*iḥzāz al-Qurʾān*) and by their refuting of defamations of the Qur'an ('Abd al-Jabbār 1960). But it is worth noting that the Mu'tazilites were blamed at times for not referring to the Qur'an in the formulation of their theological theses. Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 245/860 or 298/912), who was first a Mu'tazilite but later became an adversary of the Mu'tazilites (Stroumsa 1999: 37–9), censured the Mu'tazilites for not basing their arguments for the knowledge of God's existence and His attributes on the Qur'an and the *sunna*. In his rejoinder to Ibn al-Rāwandī's accusation, the Baghdadian Mu'tazilite Abū 'l-Ḥusayn al-Khayyāṭ (d. 300/913) plainly states that, according to the Mu'tazilites, one of God's messages is the Qur'an, and that "it is their argument against their adversaries in the subjects of God's unity (*tawḥīd*) and

justice (*adl*), the promise and the threat (*al-wa'd wa'l-wa'id*) and the order to do good and the prohibition to do evil."¹⁶

Yet, despite the above, we find elsewhere an Ash'arite reference to the Mu'tazilite use of Qur'anic verses in their treatment of theological matters. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī devotes some sections of his *al-Maṭālib al-āliyah min al-ilm al-ilāhī* ("The High Issues of Metaphysics") to a discussion on the use of the Qur'ān by the Mu'tazila in the question of free will and predestination, or more exactly, to the question of who creates man's acts: Is it God or man? The first possibility implies predestination. According to al-Rāzī, the Mu'tazilites draw the conclusion that the Qur'ān denies predestination not only from separate verses, which he cites and to which he responds, but also from the very structure of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān deals with three main issues: (a) proofs for God's unity, prophecy, and the hereafter; (b) commands and prohibitions, praising of the good-doers and dispraising the evil-doers; and (c) stories which urge man to obey God's commands. The gist of the Mu'tazilite argumentation here is that if God created man's acts, it would have been of no avail to bring forth the contents of the Qur'ān, for ought implies can; that is, if a man is prevented from creating his own acts, there is no benefit in teaching him obedience to God (al-Rāzī 1987: 275–354). Thus the contents of the Qur'ān prove free choice.

Conclusion

Although we have not approached our subject along historical lines, we can safely state that, generally speaking and on most issues, the beginning of Islamic theology (the first–third/seventh–ninth centuries) is characterized by discussions of Qur'anic verses among both traditionalists and rationalists (see, for example, the treatment in Schwarz 1972). Already in the third/ninth century we can discern an early tendency towards the use of traditions instead of Qur'anic verses on the traditionalist side, and on the rationalist side reliance on speculative arguments in place of the Qur'ān. Thus the position of the Qur'ān in Islamic theology has been impaired, that is, diluted to some extent by both tradition and reason. However, as we have seen, there are other trends. Some traditionalist theologians regarded the Qur'ān as a source of rational arguments and terms and attempted to formulate theological ideas based on both reason and the Qur'ān. But whatever their approach, the *mutakallimūn*, both rationalists and traditionalists, have continued to consider the Qur'ān as the greatest miracle God did for Muḥammad, and so defend it against all opponents' contentions.

Notes

- 1 The argument from design, which proves the existence of God through the wonderful design observed all over the world, is fully supported by the Qur'ān (Abrahamov 1990).
- 2 Naturally, other factors contributed to the development of Muslim theology, such as the influence of Christian theology and internal political tensions, but these are beyond the scope of this chapter (cf. Cook 1980).

- 3 They argue that God did not send Muḥammad.
- 4 The Muʿtazilites are the first rationalists in Islam. They are so named because their alleged founders, Wāṣil b. ʿAṭāʾ (d. 131/748) and ʿAmr b. ʿUbayd (d. 144/761), adopted ascetic conduct (*iʿtizāl*) (Stroumsa 1990). The school of the Muʿtazila began its activity at the beginning of the second/eighth century or by the end of this century at the latest.
- 5 In Islam the speculative theology is named *kalām* (literally: speech or word), which means conversation, discussion, and controversy, and the practitioner of *kalām* is a *mutakallim*. The Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) considers the science of *kalām* “a science which enables a man to procure the victory of the dogmas and actions laid down by the Legislator of the religion, and to refute all opinions contradicting them.” This is done through using discursive arguments (*EI2* 2004: “*kalām*”). The *kalām* discussion is built by a *mutakallim* on a question–answer structure in which the questioner, that is, the theological opponent, is generally fictive (van Ess 1970).
- 6 These are the Murjiʿites. Their name derives from the verb *arjʿa* meaning to postpone or to repel. They held the view that judgment of the grave sinner must be postponed to the hereafter. Alternatively, their name can be understood as those who refused to accept man’s acts as being part of the definition of belief. See on them *EI2* (2004: “Murjiʿa”).
- 7 This school is named after Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 129/746) and its members appear to be the forerunners of the Muʿtazilites on the issue of God’s attributes (Abrahamov 1996: 73–5, n. 42).
- 8 The Qurʾān is God’s speech, that is, one of His attributes. According to the Muʿtazilites, who deny the existence of God’s attributes as separate entities in God, because such existence would impair God’s unity and eternity, the Qurʾān was created by God (*al-Qurʾān makhluq*). The traditionalists who affirm God’s attributes as separate entities existing in God consequently claim that the Qurʾān was not created and it is eternal (al-Ashʿarī 1963: 582–600; Bouman 1959).
- 9 Muslim theologians also disputed about the question of whether the utterance of the Qurʾān is created or uncreated.
- 10 Here Al-Ashʿarī uses the term atom in a brief manner. Usually, the *mutakallimūn* designate atom by *al-juzʿ alladhī lā yatajazzaʿu* (indivisible part) or *al-jawhar al-wāḥid* (the single substance) (Pines [1936] 1997: 4). Al-Ashʿarī’s statement that every body has an end is borrowed from Aristotle (Davidson 1987: 89, 409–11).
- 11 The Ṣāḥiriyya school of law and theology was so named because they relied exclusively on the literal meaning (*ṣāḥir*) of the Qurʾān and the *summa* in their legal and theological discussions (*EI2* 2004: “Ṣāḥiriyya”).
- 12 In the context of predestination, Muslim theologians have dealt mainly with the question of who creates man’s acts, God or man (Abrahamov 1990: 40).
- 13 If God had hands (Q 38:75) or organs such as eyes (Q 54:14), which means that He is composed of parts, He would be considered a created entity, because a composition of parts is characteristic of created things. Since God is the eternal Creator, it is inconceivable for Him to be created and produced in time. Thus, rational argument contradicts anthropomorphism.
- 14 The Zaydites accepted the Muʿtazilite doctrines beginning in the middle of the third/ninth century (Abrahamov 1990). Also the Imāmiyya, the Shīʿites who believe in the existence of twelve imams, accepted the Muʿtazilite theology in the fourth/tenth century (Madelung 1979). For an Imāmī text influenced by the Muʿtazila see al-Ṭūsī (1986).

- 15 This treatise was published by ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān as a work of ‘Abd al-Jabbār (1965) (Gimaret 1979; Abrahamov 1993b: 44).
- 16 These are four out of the five principles of the Mu‘tazila. The fifth principle is the intermediate position (*manzila bayna ‘l-manzilatayn*) of the grave sinner between belief and unbelief. See al-Khayyāṭ (1957: 93 of the Arabic text).

Further reading

- Abrahamov, Binyamin (1992) Ibn Taymiyya on the agreement of reason with tradition. *The Muslim World* 82, 256–72.
- Abrahamov, Binyamin (1993a) Al-Ghazālī’s supreme way to know God. *Studia Islamica* 77, 141–68.
- Abrahamov, Binyamin (1993b) ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s theory of divine assistance (*luṭf*). *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 16, 41–58.
- Abrahamov, Binyamin (1996) *Anthropomorphism and Interpretation of the Qur’ān in the Theology of al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm, Kitāb al-Mustarshid*. Brill, Leiden.
- Abrahamov, Binyamin (1998) *Islamic Theology, Traditionalism and Rationalism*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
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- Goldziher, I. (1981) *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (translation of *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, 1910).
- Peters, J. R. T. M. (1976) *God’s Created Speech: A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Mu‘tazilī Qāḍī l-Quḍāt Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī*. Brill, Leiden.
- Stroumsa, S. (1990) The beginnings of the Mu‘tazila reconsidered. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13, 265–93.
- Stroumsa, S. (1999) *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam, Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and their Impact on Islamic Thought*. Brill, Leiden.

CHAPTER 35

Jurisprudence

A. Kevin Reinhart

The Qur'ān of the legists is a different Qur'ān from the one held in the hand. It is less, and sometimes more than the book one buys from religious bookstores across the Islamic world. It has parts that are obscure and parts that are clear, figural and literal parts, parts that are explicit and parts that are implicit. On the one hand, a Qur'ānic verse has no context in the obvious sense – the meaning of a verse is not clarified by the verses that surround it. On the other hand, no verse, in principle, is self-subsistent; any verse draws its true meaning from a constellation of relevant verses throughout the Qur'ān and also from the *sunna*, from previous agreement about its meaning, and from reflection upon its linguistic implications. Above all, the Qur'ān is truth and, because it is all truth, its language – Arabic – and even its very particles require the legists' study and analysis.

Questions of the historical development of legal doctrine are too complex for a single chapter – or book. By the fourth Islamic century, however, juristic theoreticians had constructed a fairly stable body of doctrine that remained the framework for legal approaches thereafter for a millennium – indeed, the framework that for many still shapes the sophisticated legal appropriation of the Qur'ān. Here we will treat the Qur'ān from the standpoint of the Islamic science of principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).

Defining the Book

In the science of “principles of jurisprudence,” one of the bases (*uṣūl*), indeed according to, for example, al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), *the* base for legal assessment is the book.¹ Al-Shaybānī (d. 189/805) defines the Qur'ān thus: “The book is the Qur'ān which is sent

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down to the messenger of God, which is written [between] covers [or leaves] of the codices, plurally transmitted to us in the seven well-known consonantal forms” (al-Sarakhsī 1372: I, 279).² A world of dogma and a history of scholarly compromises is summed up in this short sentence. First, there is the assertion that the Qur’ān as we have it is complete (we will see below a caveat to this) with no parts suppressed (see Burton 1977: 49ff. on the missing parts of the Qur’ān). This refutes the doctrine of some of the Shī’a that parts of the revelation supporting ‘Alid claims were discarded by the redactors (Kohlberg 1972). It also distinguishes the Qur’ān from other statements attributed to God in other sources – for instance the so-called divine utterances (*aḥādīth al-qudsiyya*; see Graham 1977) or other scriptural books such as the *Injīl* (Gospels). At the same time, “seven variant readings” of the Qur’ān were all acceptable and equally Qur’ānic. This is because all seven are “well known” and, in what is the key point, plurally transmitted (*naql mutawātir*).³

Reliability (*Tawātur*)

The concept of plural transmission is the bedrock of Qur’ānic epistemology. It is that, on the one hand, an uninterrupted string of reciters has handed on the text one to another over the period since the time of revelation and redaction (see As-Said 1975). On the other hand, the transmission also is, as it were, plural horizontally – so that no part of a generation’s Qur’ān transmission is dependent on a single source. *Tawātur* means both horizontal and vertical plurality of transmission such that no mistake, no forgery, no lacuna could possibly be agreed upon by the transmitters (al-Sarakhsī 1372: I, 282–5).⁴ Just as the indisputable details of the cultus – the number of daily acts of worship and the number of cycles (*raka’āt*) appropriate to them, the amounts due for *zakāt*-tax and bloodwit are transmitted plurally, and so are known indisputably – so, too, the Qur’ān’s text is known with indisputable certainty because of its plural transmission (al-Sarakhsī 1372: I, 282–3).

The Basmala

The boundaries of the text are, for the legist (*uṣūlī*), rather less stable than reference to the “text between the two covers” might suggest. For example, all *sūras* except the ninth *sūra* begin with the written phrase: “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate” (see EI2 2004: “*basmala*”). What is the status of this phrase, *uṣūlīs* asked. Is it a textual throat-clearing to signify the beginning of a *sūra*, or is it an integral verse (*āya*) of the Qur’ānic text itself?⁵ In short, most Sunnī schools considered the *basmala* part of the Qur’ān while some Ḥanafīs did not – they considered the *basmala* to be textual but as a sort of punctuation that could be omitted when it was contextually clear that a *sūra* was beginning (al-Bukhārī 1393/1974: I, 23). There are important ritual implications to the question of the *basmala*’s textuality. For instance, is a ritual recitation in worship (*ṣalāt*) that omits the *basmala* valid? Can worship performed behind an *imām* who omits the *basmala* be valid (see Weiss 1996)? So this quite hypothetical-sounding textual problem has important ritual consequences.

Abrogation – The Assessment but Not the Recitation

The text of the written or printed Qurʾān does not coincide completely with what we might call “the legal Qurʾān.” The legal Qurʾān is, from one perspective, much smaller than the published text. By some estimates there are 350–550 legally stipulative verses, but some of these are “erased” because some verses are superseded by other scriptural sources. This supersession is known in the literature as “abrogation,” *naskh* (see Burton 1990; Hallaq 1997: 68–74; Kamali 1991: 149–67; *EI2* 2004: “*naskh*”). The literature on supersession and its ramifications is voluminous, but for our purposes what matters is that, just as the Qurʾān abrogates previous scriptures such as the Torah or Injil, parts of the Qurʾānic text are, as it were, withdrawn by other subsequent Qurʾānic texts – or even, for some legists, by subsequent acts or sayings of Muḥammad.

For instance, classically, wine, which is praised as one of God’s bounties (Q 16:67), is proscribed definitively in Q 5:90–2 – the latter having superseded the assessment in the former. The supersession concept reflects or creates the genre of “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) which details the circumstances provoking revelation of a given Qurʾānic pericope (see Rippin 1985b, 1988). To each verse the tradition attached a story of the “occasion” (*sabab*) of its revelation. These stories served two functions: first, they provided something like “legislative intent” to amplify and define the scope of the verse. Thus the verse banning wine occurred either in the context of ʿUmar’s petitioning for clarification on the status of wine, or when Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ reproached someone for drinking wine and the drinker split Sa’d’s nose in retaliation, or, perhaps, when two of the Anṣār tribes got into a drunken boasting match, or from concerns of general disorder (al-Ṭabarī 1388/1968: VII, 32–5 ad. Q 5:92). Second, the *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature provided a putative order of verses’ revelation so that, where there was conflict in the verses’ legislation, the antecedent could be superseded by the latter. The whole chain of verses concerning wine – it is a bounty (Q 16:67); it has virtues but drawbacks (Q 2:219); do not come to prayer drunk (Q 4:43); wine is forbidden (Q 5:90) – is sorted out as part of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* enterprise (al-Ṭabarī 1388/1968: IV, 96 ad. Q 4:43).

In this way the Qurʾānic verse is decontextualized from its textual environs and resituated in a *Sitz im Leben* that may define the scope of the verse, but more importantly, places it in chronological order with other verses that might seem to contradict it. Determine the later verse and you have determined the effective one. As a result, the number of legally effective verses is considerably reduced while contradictions are eliminated and the legal message of the Qurʾān is clarified. In this sense, however, the legists’ Qurʾān is much diminished in size from the textual Qurʾān.

Abrogating – The Recitation but Not the Assessment

The received text is further destabilized by a doctrine invoked in only a few cases, the doctrine of “superseding the assessment but not the recitation.” This subversive notion was invoked to justify the legal requirement that free, married adulterators be executed by stoning. According to this notion, the uncertainty of the Qurʾānic provisions

(Q 4:15–16; 24:2) for adulteresses is removed by a Qurʾānic revelation that somehow never made it into the redacted text. It was asserted – and accepted by many legists – that there had been revealed a verse ordaining this penalty which read, “The *shaykh* and the *shaykha*, when they fornicate, stone them outright as an exemplary punishment from God. God is Mighty and Wise” (Burton 1977: 78); this was considered to remain in force even though the verse was never redacted into the codex (Burton 1977: 72ff.; Burton 1990: chapter 7). Though there are very few instances of this extra-Qurʾānic efficacious verse, the notion that such a thing exists in a few cases makes the boundaries of the extant written text more porous than might at first seem to be the case.

Thus the straightforward definition of the Qurʾān as “what is between the two covers” is less straightforward than it might have seemed. There are seven “acceptable” versions of the Qurʾān, and for some, the *basmala* is part of the text, for others it is not. More importantly, some of what is in between the two covers is efficacious, but a significant amount is not. Indeed, some parts of the Qurʾān, being later, are more important than others, and there are cases where a Qurʾānic verse is rendered insignificant by a Qurʾānic verse “outside the two covers.”

Translation

What is it that lies between the two covers? Is it sounds, is it comprehensible words, is it meanings? The text of the Qurʾān is determined by “being between the two covers,” but the *uṣūlīs* wrestled with the question of whether the Qurʾān is its utterances – sounds and locutions – or whether it included the ideas underlying the words or even the inferences drawn from these sounds and words. The *Ur*-text of the Qurʾān is, of course, in Arabic. But if the Qurʾān is its meanings, then rituals involving the Qurʾān ought to be doable in a translation – when the meanings of the Qurʾān are embodied in another language. The ritual implications were significant. Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), it was reported, allowed Muslims to perform ritual worship using Persian translations of the Qurʾān. Though other Ḥanafīs hesitated to embrace this position (see the discussion in Amīr Bādshāh 1350: III, 4), the other schools rejected it out of hand. The best his apologists could say of the esteemed Abū Ḥanīfa was that either he had come to repudiate this position, or he had allowed the use of Persian only when necessary because a Muslim was unable to learn the Qurʾān. In other than these cases, its use was prohibited, they said, and for later scholars to defend the idea amounted to active heresy (al-Zarkashī 1413/1992: I, 448; al-Sarakhsī 1372: I, 282 for a Ḥanafī defense). Linguistic specificity was understood somehow to be intrinsic to the Qurʾān: perhaps because of some features of Arabic itself – that it is “more capacious, more eloquent” (al-Zarkashī 1413/1992: I, 445). More than a utilitarian reason, there is an important dogmatic reason for the insistence on the Qurʾān as inseparably sound, structure, and meaning (al-Sarakhsī 1372: I, 281).⁶ The Qurʾān’s miracle is its inimitability (*iʿjāz*) – the very word translated as miracle, *muʿjiza*, means an incapacity – something one is incapable of, or prevented from doing. The Qurʾān’s *iʿjāz* resides in both its expression (*iʿrāb*) and its presentational structure (*naẓm*). Consequently, “the translation of the Qurʾān into

Persian (for ritual purposes) or any other [language] is not permissible; instead one must recite it in the form to which is connected its inimitability, which precludes translation from it and renders other languages incapable of the perspicuousness by which it is characterized above any other language” (al-Zarkashī 1413/1992: I, 447). As al-Qaffāl (d. 507/1113) is reported to have said: “It is possible to arrive [in commentary] to some of what God intended, while being unable [to convey] other parts. But if one wants to recite in Persian, it is impossible to come to all of what God intended” (al-Zarkashī 1413/1992: I, 447; also see Ibn Qudāma 1403/1983: I, 526ff.).

Hermeneutics: Found Text and the Construction of Context

It is a characteristic feature of the Qurʾān for jurists that it is, in a sense, a “found” text. It must be worked with, as is; it is a closed text. There is no possibility of asking the speaker for clarification of an unclear passage or for new information when a new case arises. Faced, then, with this textual edifice, the jurist’s task was to find in it as much clarity and certainty as possible and to find the means to have it address new cases.

To enable the jurist’s task, they embraced three assumptions, or as we may call them, myths. These served the same function as primordial narratives inasmuch as they made assertions about the founders’ time that determined later belief, practice, and orientation. These jurists’ myths of the Qurʾān were (1) that the Qurʾān is language; (2) that the Qurʾān’s language is Arabic, and not just haphazardly Arabic but normative and normal Arabic. As far as other Arabic texts might differ linguistically, to this extent they were deviant; (3) the Qurʾān can be understood only in context, but a verse’s context is not necessarily textual but, one might say, socio-historical. It must be understood against whatever else has been preserved of the founding generation’s practice and discourse. That supplementary knowledge must come from another restricted set of sources whose corpus amounts to a second Islamic scripture.

The Qurʾān Is Language

The Qurʾān is language: it is, as we have seen, word (*naẓm*), or utterance (*lafẓ*), and it is meaning. Jurists believed, however, that “there is no natural relationship between the utterance and what it signifies” (al-Isnawī 1993: 211). This means not merely that the word *kitāb* does not necessarily signify “book,” but that even in a particular language in which *kitāb* might mean “book,” it does not always or reliably signify that. They recognized whole varieties of signification and implicature apart from mere denotation. Bearing in mind the definition of the Qurʾān as “utterance,” and “speech” or, in the words of al-Maḥbūbī (d. 747/1347), “eternal speech and that which is recited; an ordered thing⁷ indicating meaning” (al-Maḥbūbī, al-Taftazānī, and Umayrat 1996: I, 71–2). The Qurʾān irreducibly is language. For a given utterance, for instance, the jurist had to consider not just what was said (*maṭṭūq*) but what was understood (*mafhūm*) for a statement – locutionary meaning and illocutionary meaning, as we would say.

The illocutionary might agree in thrust with the locutionary, in which case it was *maṣhūm muwāfiqa*, or be contrary to the locutionary, *maṣhūm mukhāliḥa*.⁸ In short, it is meaning that the jurist seeks first from the text of the Qurʾān. “One should know that the aim is attaining the moral assessment (*ḥukm sharʿī*) but that attaining of the moral assessment awaits first the attaining of ‘meaning’; one must therefore inquire into the attaining of meaning” (al-Maḥbūbī and al-Taftazānī 1998: I, 72). In this respect, the jurist’s enterprise was indifferent to the particular language in which revelation appeared.

The Qurʾān Is Arabic

The Qurʾān is not itself, we have seen, in any random language, but only in Arabic. This is because the Qurʾān is understood as speech, with the written text an edited anthology of that speech. In so far as it is language, tools that might ordinarily be applied to any language for its analysis were applied by the *uṣūlī* to the Qurʾān. In so far as it is uniquely effective language (producing not just meaning but also the moral/legal assessment), the Qurʾān is read in ways particular to itself as *sui generis* (al-Maḥbūbī and al-Taftazānī 1998: I, 72).

As the discussion of translating the Qurʾān has shown, the Qurʾān is inadequately represented by a translation because a translation necessarily closes off some concepts that are meanings of a given Qurʾānic Arabic text. Therefore it is as Arabic that the Qurʾān has to be read, understood, and exploited. The *uṣūlī* had available a whole series of tools developed by reading Arabic prose and poetry – including the Qurʾān – by many generations of meticulous and analytically original lexicographers, grammarians, and rhetoricians.

The fact that the Qurʾān is the Qurʾān in Arabic establishes the hermeneutical tools the legist may use in reading the Qurʾān. The strong consensus that everything in the Qurʾān was in use by Arabs (whether or not it was etymologically Arabic) meant that all of the tools from the Arabic grammatical and syntactical sciences would be serviceable for the legal reader of the Qurʾān.⁹

Uṣūlīs were instructed in the instrumental use of the Qurʾān. The first level of analysis might be to see Arabic as a kind of self-sufficient map of intended meaning. Careful study of its landmarks would tell the legist exactly where he is in the meaning of the text. As an example, every major *uṣūl* work has a section trying definitively to define the scope and implication of Arabic particles. The most elementary linguistic or hermeneutical inquiry was at the level of meaning and semantic scope.

Particles

As an example, the humble particle *wa*, a mere single consonant (written with only the equivalent of a double-u [“w”]), is very often equivalent to the English conjugation “and”; sometimes it may be translated as “while”; at other times it functions as a kind of

punctuation. So the *uṣūlī* posed the question: If one says, “I saw Zayd *and* ‘Amr,” is a sequence implied? Did he see Zayd *then* ‘Amr? A related problem is whether any conjunction in time is implied: Could “I saw Zayd *and* ‘Amr” possibly refer to a situation in which he saw Zayd in 2000 and ‘Amr in 2004 (al-Zarkashī 1413/1992: II, 203–4)? No sequence is implied, say the Shāfi‘īs and Ḥanafīs, and no temporal limitations are effected by the use of “and.”

This seemingly arcane discussion bears fruit in a case where, for instance, one stipulates, “I leave my house in trust for my children and my children’s children.” Given what we know of the force of “and,” it is clear that at the owner’s death his/her children and grandchildren will jointly share in the house immediately; it is not the case that the grandchildren succeed to the house at the passing of my children (al-Zarkashī 1413/1992: II, 204).

Or consider the verses enjoining ablution on those who would perform worship: “O you who are faithful! When you rise to undertake worship, then wash your faces and (*wa*) your hands,...and (*wa*) rub your head and (*wa*) your feet” (Q 5:6). If “and” denotes sequence, then one must wash the face before the hands, and those before the head, and those before washing the feet. But since the Ḥanafīs, for instance, believed that *wa* implied no sequencing, then the ritual ablution could, on Qur’ānic evidence alone, be done in any order (Ibn Nujaym 1355/1936: II, 5).

Also, consequently, Ibn Nujaym (d. 970/1563; 1355/1936: II, 6) states, if one says “to a woman with whom one has an as-yet unconsummated marriage, ‘If you enter the house you are divorced *and* divorced *and* divorced,’ she is divorced only once, according to Abū Ḥanīfa [and thus, can be remarried to the same man, without an intervening marriage to someone else].” This is because the *wa* has no temporal signification. Having declared her divorced, the rest of the utterance is void of meaning. Presumably, had he said “I divorce you, *then* (*fa*) I divorce you, *then* I divorce you,” she would be triply divorced, and so they could not remarry without her contracting an intervening marriage.

The declaration to a slave, “Give us a thousand *and/then/while* [possible meanings of *wa*] you are free,” poses a problem. It cannot be that *and* simply conjoins two facts, as in “a dog *and* a cat,” because no slave could have “a thousand” to give for his or her freedom. However, *wa* cannot signify temporal sequence. Understanding of context (in this case, social reality) leads one to understand that the *wa* is being used in a figurative (literally: “extended”) way (*majāz*) to signify a state (*ḥāl*). The second part is not a condition but rather it is an inverted locution whose implied meaning is “Be free and you shall give me a thousand,” or it implies a state of capacity: “Give me a thousand with the capacity of freedom, freedom being the state in which [the slave] does the giving” (Ibn Nujaym 1355/1936: II, 8).

This extensive discussion of the slightest of Arabic particles is simply a demonstration of the significant consequences that follow from the minute examination of the Qur’ān’s Arabic locutions. The Qur’ān offers not just rules but definitive models of linguistic usage, and these norms then shape contracts, performative utterances, and other forms of legal discourse.

The Qurʾān's Context

For the legist, the Qurʾānic text is not homogeneous. Instead, verses have different rhetorical or pragmatic qualities which affect their efficacy. Some are self-subsistent but some call out for a rhetorical context that modifies or alters their plain meaning. The task of the *uṣūlī* is to grasp correctly the nature of the utterance and to place it in its full rhetorical context.

Uṣūlī analyses of the utterance (*lafẓ*; plural *alfāẓ*) begin with the master myth of Qurʾānic hermeneutics, one that can be traced back at least to al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820). Most utterances have a context of some sort that is indispensable for the listener to understand what the speaker intends. The Qurʾān's first auditors lived that context – they were aware of the totality of the Qurʾān, Muḥammad's normative acts and statements, and the linguistic and customary usage of the Arabs, especially those of the Quraysh tribe (al-Shāfiʿī 1399/1979: section 51). Afterwards, that epistemological holism was broken by time and distance and no one anymore naïvely knows all that any of the companions of the prophet knew almost without reflection. Al-Shāfiʿī's great creative assertion, one embraced by nearly all subsequent jurists, was that all of revelation – that is, *all* of the Qurʾān and all of the prophetic utterances and acts recorded in the *ḥadīth* – should be taken as a single expression (Ali 2000: 52, citing Ibn Ḥazm). Consequently, it is the task of the legal hermeneuticist to recover the lost wholeness, the “thick” understanding of the Qurʾānic locution that belonged to the companions. He must master the data that allow the inquirer to understand a Qurʾānic utterance properly. For every Qurʾānic utterance, then, the *uṣūlī* searches the rest of the Qurʾān, and the *ḥadīth* that record the prophet's acts, for texts to supplement the utterance in question. This includes “occasions of revelation.” The supplementary datum is called *bayān* by al-Shāfiʿī, that is, “elucidation.” While al-Shāfiʿī's exact terminology becomes less central over time as the hermeneutical sciences grew more elaborate, the analytic assumption – that texts are usually not self-subsistent – rules all subsequent *uṣūlī* scholarship.

This attention to context both in ordinary Arabic linguistics and particularly in Qurʾānic studies gave rise to extensive attempts to categorize Qurʾānic expression in terms of its self-subsistence, its effective force, its mode of address, its clarity, and its effective force.¹⁰

Self-subsistence: Manifest and Indeterminate, Figurative and Literal

Zāhir, “manifest,” is a term for a text whose meaning seems initially to be, perhaps or in fact, obvious, whether through the utterance itself, or some other factor.¹¹ A manifest text, according to Ibn Qudāma (1378: 92), is one which “one understands first in its unrestricted sense, though the possibility exists of another [sense].” It is “when two meanings are possible, it is the most manifest...one may not ignore [this meaning]

without reflection (*ta'wīl*)." An example could be Q 2:275: "God has permitted selling." It would take a very strong indicant to lead one to suppose that the plain sense of this utterance – "selling is permitted by God" – is not operative.

The concept of *zāhir* is a kind of stand-in for the master-view of the entire Qur'ān. It has an initial meaning, in most cases, that strikes the reader, and that meaning must be taken seriously. Yet the encounter with the *zāhir* text does not end at the first experience of it. Various cues may turn the reader to reflection upon other possible understandings of the text.

So, from one perspective, the opposite of a *zāhir* text is a text "reflected upon" (*mu'awwal*). A manifest text generally has at least two meanings, one straightforward and one to which one moves only because of some indicant that it is not the obvious, but some secondary meaning, that is intended. The obvious meaning is, all things being equal, the preferred meaning. But, on reflection (another meaning of the root 'w-l), an opinion may be changed. Thus, when the Qur'ān says, "We built the sky by hand" (Q 51:47), the manifest meaning is that God used His hands to build the sky. But reflection on the doctrine of God's incorporeality inclines one away from the obvious meaning to something else; that something else is the interpreted meaning. Similarly, the meaning "Do not eat of that over which the name of God has not been mentioned" (Q 6:121) would seem to allow all foods over which the name of God has been mentioned; but reflection excludes, for instance, animals sacrificed to false gods, whether or not the name of God was pronounced over it (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 172).

Ta'wīl, "reflection," is, according to Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223; 1378: 92), "the diversion of the utterance from the probable manifest meaning to a probability that is [in the end] preferable to its alternative; [the means] is an indicant that [the secondary meaning] is more likely than the meaning to which the manifest sense points." He adds that the secondary meaning may be quite remote from the manifest or primary meaning; in that case the indicant that prompts diversion must be proportionally powerful. The indicant may be contextual, or another manifest text, or a piece of *qiyās*-reasoning that gives rise to a preference for the unlikelier sense of the utterance.

For the student of Islamic thought, the significance of *zāhir* as a concept may be that unreflective "literalism" is impossible for the competent jurist. Every text, no matter how bald-faced, must be subject to reflection because of the possibility that somewhere in the revelational discourse there is a text that might be brought to bear on the manifest text so as to divert its meaning from the obvious to a more obscure, but more correct, sense.

The pragmatic opposite of the manifest text is the *mujmal* or indeterminate text. Indeterminate utterances have more than one sense and, on the face of it, there is no reason to prefer one to another (Ibn Qudāma 1378: 93). An example would be Q 2:237, "or they, in whose hand is the marriage contract, forgo [the marriage portion]." This could refer either to the bride or her guardian, and textually there is no immediate reason to prefer one sense to another. In this respect it can also be called *mushtarak* (a term that some restrict to homonyms). In addition to indeterminacy from imprecision or lexical equivalence, there are many reasons why an utterance can be indeterminate, for instance ambiguous declension: *al-mukhtār* (meaning "chosen" or "choice") can be

both an active and passive participle (Ibn Qudāma 1378: 93–4). Whatever the reason, when confronted with a *mujmal* text, the jurist is obliged to withhold judgment until the speaker or speaker’s intention can be clarified (also see al-Shīrāzī 1377/1957: 26–7).

Like the *mujmal*, the term *mushtarak* – more common as a Ḥanafī hermeneutical term – etymologically implies the idea of the incorporation of diversity into singularity in a confusing way. *Mushtarak* words share a single form among diverse meanings. For the Ḥanafīs, the *mushtarak* is “what includes concepts with different definitions.” A classic example would be the word *‘ayn*, which can mean “hard currency,” “eye,” and “spring.” When confronted with a homonymous utterance, the jurist “must stay his judgment – with the condition that he reflect, seeking [grounds for] preference of some of its aspects so as to act upon it” (Ibn Nujaym 1355/1936: I, 109–10). The entire reflective process is one of seeking further clarification of the context, broadly speaking, of the utterance. Similar is the case of the term *qurū’*, a word used in Q 2:228 that means both “purification” and “menstruation” (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 167; al-Shīrāzī 1377/1957: 93). Words are used in the Qur’ān both in an extended sense and in their original sense, such as words derived from the root *sh-r-y*, which means “to sell” but also in Q 2:227 “to impose a difficult duty on oneself.” This is, at least initially, a *mushtarak* usage, since wherever the root occurs, both meanings are possible (al-Isnawī 1993: 214).

Q 2:67–71 shows the hermeneuticist a model for the “disambiguation” of an indeterminate utterance. The utterance that modifies the original unclear reference is called in some texts *bayān*, “clarification.” The unclear is “that which is in need of clarification”; clarifying is “taking a thing from the domain of uncertainty (*ishkāl*) to the domain of manifestness (*al-tajallī*)” (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 166). So, when Moses is ordered to sacrifice a cow (Q 2:67), the word *baqara*, “cow,” is unclear; it is generic (*mujmal al-jins*). Consequently, in Q 2:68–71, the reference to “cow” is clarified: it should be neither calf nor immature; it must be yellow, unyoked, whole, and without mark. The “disambiguated” text, or one that requires no clarification, is called *mubīn* (though the term can also be used for the clarifying text itself) (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 170). Poetically, the concept is explained:

It is derived from the throne on which the bride is displayed which points to [the idea that] the text¹² in its clarity resembles a sitting bride on high, unconcealed from anyone. It is not possible that she be other than who she is. Likewise the text is in its manifestness which bears no possibility other than of a single meaning. (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 171)

We have already seen that one source of indeterminacy in the text is uncertainty about whether the utterance is used in its “original” (*ḥaqīqī*) or “extended” (*majāzī*) sense. The problem here is how tethered the reader is to be to a supposed original/authentic sense of a word or phrase.

The classic example is “lion” (*asad*). When the legist encounters the term, it may mean either “beast of prey” (literal) or “man of courage” (figurative). The figurative is known by certain clues (*adilla*) among other signs, being (a) something attached to the utterance that restricts it to a figurative use like “fire of war” or “wing of kindness.”

Either word in the phrase can be taken literally but together they compel the hearer to understand an extended, not literal, sense; (b) something joined to a word or phrase that makes one hesitate to understand another thing, as in Q 3:54: “They plotted and God plotted and God is the best of plotters.” The second clause – “God plotted” – makes one doubt the literalness of the first clause; (c) a negation of the obvious – as if one said of a foolish man “he is not a donkey” (al-Isnawī 1993: 217). Another *majāzī* example would be Q 5:33, “Those who make war on God and His messenger,” because God cannot be defeated or battled in the ordinary sense of the term (see Kīyā al-Harrāsī n.d: III, 126).

As a legal problem, the *locus classicus* of the literal/extended text for Ḥanafīs and Shāfiīs (but not, e.g., for Mālikīs) is Q 4:43 (see also Q 5:6), “Or if you have touched a woman,” in a verse devoted to the “simulacrum ablution” (*tayammum*). The text says “if you have touched a woman” then perform *tayammum*. Is mere touching enough to require cleansing? *Tayammum* is a substitute for both the minor and major ablution. Since it is the major ablution that is prescribed for a certain kind of contact between a man and a woman – namely intercourse – the Ḥanafīs and Shāfiīs infer that “touching” cannot mean here “contact” in the literal sense of the word. “So,” says al-Isnawī, “touching is verified as an extended usage for intercourse – since the obligation to do *tayammum* is established [only] for intercourse” (al-Isnawī 1993: 237).

Textual Force: General and Restricted

A problem with any utterance, especially an imperative one, is its scope and its force. If the Qur’ān says to fast, does that apply to everyone, even those, for instance, for whom fasting would be a harmful act? In *uṣūlī* hermeneutics this was discussed under the rubric of “general expressions” (*āmm*) and “restricted (or ‘qualified’) expressions” (*khāṣṣ*).

The general is defined as “that which indicates a plurality of individuals,” that is, God or the prophet in some way require an act, and address the command to some group or class. Conceptually, general and qualified are relative terms, of course. “O men” is general; it is generic for all males. It is a qualified subset of “O humankind,” however, which, in turn, can be seen to be a subset of animals and so forth (see Weiss 1992: 393). Generality can be signaled by extra-textual considerations or textual ones. *Uṣūlīs* look first to the *form* of expression to determine which, *a priori*, are general and which are qualified. There are various forms that signify the general.

One indication that a phrase is general in scope would be that the utterance contains a generic noun (“Man is superior to woman”; “The *dīnār* is better than the *dirham*”).¹³ Another indication of generality would be a plural definite noun, such as “men” (which has the definite article in Arabic, *al-rijāl*) or “legal scholars” (*fuqahā*), or “men of Basra.” Or there might be an utterance that “includes two or more things or states” (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 137 and n. 3). Not all indicators of generality are grammatical; there are also lexical indicants, as in the Qur’ānic phrase “Those who make war on God” (Q 5:33). “Those who” marks the general. Indefinite prepositions are also indicators of the

general, as with “whoever” (*man*), as in “whoever is rational” (*fīman ya‘qil*) or “whoever enters my house, I will give a *dirham*,” because that means “anyone,” whether the person be free or slave, male or female (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 138–41).

Not all Qur’ānic verses have legislative force for all Muslims in all circumstances. Verses that are not “general” in their force are qualified, restricted, specified (*khāṣṣ*). “Qualification” distinguishes some members of a set from others and “does not imply the applicability [of the utterance] to a genus, while the general does imply that,” says the commentator. Qualification is envisioned as follows. Consider a phrase like “Those among you who see the [crescent moon that marks the start of the] month [of Ramaḍān], let them fast [the month]” (Q 2:185). After reflection and investigation (not a very lengthy one, most likely), one recognizes that the general injunction to fast is qualified by Q 2:184, “Whoever among you is ill or traveling then [let him fast] the number [of days he misses] on other days.” This “extracts” those who are ill or traveling from the genus of those otherwise obliged to fast the month of Ramaḍān; it restricts somewhat the class of those “who see the month” and are otherwise required to fast.

We can understand something of the difference between general and qualified if we consider a controversy over whether the phrase “the men” is general in a way that is not true of “the women” (Ibn Nujaym 1355/1936: 93–4). It is a given that “the women” cannot be general in that the phrase cannot include men. It is, as linguists would say, a “marked” category, in contrast to “people.” Under the rules of Arabic syntax, “the men” may or may not be general. So how should the legists read a Qur’ānic command to “men”? Does “the men” include a set larger than is stipulated by the lexical meaning of the term – masculine persons? In the end, the consensus emerges that the lexical trumps the grammatical. As al-Taftazānī (d. 792/1390) says, “the men” is not a “logical category” the way that “the horse” (“horse”) is, as can be seen in the differing Qur’ānic stipulations for prophecy, leadership, witnessing, and so forth, since prophecy and leadership are for men, and the rules for male witness differ from those for female witness. Thus, men and women are functionally different species under the genus “humankind” and “general” terms address genii, not species or individuals (al-Maḥbūbī and al-Taftazānī 1998: 29).

Another way in which the Qur’ān qualifies general injunctions is through restrictive clauses – what al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) summed up as “exception, condition and restriction by quality.” “Honor the legists, save Zayd” exemplifies qualification by exception. “Honor the legists if they come to you,” exemplifies qualification by condition. And “honor the legists who have memorized God’s book” demonstrates the meaning of “restrictive qualification by attribute or quality.” There are other kinds of qualification as well (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 148).

All of the foregoing are obvious examples of qualification, in which a phrase is immediately altered by either grammatical, syntactic, or lexical considerations. But indicants of qualification may also be revelation that qualifies revelation, either directly connected with the utterance that it qualifies or separate from it (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 145–6). As we saw with the restriction of the general injunction to fast by the prior exception of the travelers or those who are ill, al-Shāfi‘ī’s extended notion of context means that a text far removed from the verse in question may effectively restrict it. The text may be

elsewhere in the Qurʾān or even in the prophetic *sunna*. This modification of a verse by a distant text demands more of the hermeneuticist. These “separated” qualifications are utterances affecting an utterance – however distant – when they are, in some way, juxtaposed against it. The various positive sources of law, particularly Qurʾān and *sunna*, can interact, so that Qurʾān, for example, is qualified by some command or piece of data in the *sunna*, as conveyed in the *ḥadīth* (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 159).¹⁴

Examples of texts of Qurʾān qualifying other Qurʾānic verses would include “Marry such women as seem good to you” (Q 4:3), which is qualified by Q 4:23, “Prohibited to you are your mothers.” Likewise Q 4:11, “God charges you with provisioning [through inheritance] your children,” is modified by a strong *ḥadīth*, “The killer does not inherit” (al-Mārdīnī 1996: 161). Or consider Q 2:228, “Women who are divorced shall keep themselves apart three (monthly) courses.”¹⁵ This would seem to be a general dictum for divorced women. But then there is Q 33:49: “then you divorce them before you have touched them, then there is no period that you should reckon,” which qualifies Q 2:228 by making it read, in effect, “Women who are divorced [whom you have touched],” that is, this reading specifies a subset of those mentioned in the verse to which the qualifying verse is applied.¹⁶

The task of the Qurʾānic hermeneuticist is to read the text correctly so that the scope of a Qurʾānic dictate is properly understood either as applying to everyone, or to some subset of Muslims. If a text appears to be indeterminate, the task is to try to find the information to resolve the utterance’s indeterminacy. Even if a text appears to be general, or qualified on the face of it, the reader must continue to inquire, since some utterances seem to be general but are actually restricted, and vice versa.

Ḥanafī Rhetorical Analysis: The Sliding Scale of Clarity and Effective Force

The hermeneutic techniques just discussed are shared – with mostly small differences – among three Sunnī schools: Mālikī, Ḥanbalī, and Shāfiʿī. It is worth briefly noting the Ḥanafīs’ differences because hermeneutics is so central to Ḥanafī *uṣūl* and so distinct from the other schools’ methods in many respects. The Ḥanafīs were particularly inclined to linguistic taxonomy but not from analytic energy alone. They correlated the obligation to act to the possibility of disputing the force of an utterance, that is, to its clarity. The result was that they used the vocabulary of rhetoric in a distinctly Ḥanafī way.

For the Ḥanafī, a *ẓāhir*, or “manifest,” text is the least certain of intelligible texts. The term is used for a text whose intention is obvious to the hearer from its form. In the Ḥanafī scheme, this kind of clarity governs one’s response. One must act on the basis of what seems manifest in an utterance. A *naṣṣ*, “obvious,” text is clearer than the one which is manifest (*ẓāhir*) in its meaning, though the clarity does not come from the form of the text, but from other factors, particularly context. The difference between *ẓāhir* and *naṣṣ* is explained in this way:

If one says “I saw so-and-so when the people came to me,” “came to me” is *ẓāhir* because talking about the coming of the people is not the intent toward which the speaker is driving,

though it is likely that the people did [in fact] come. [This can be learned from the text.] Whereas, if one moves the clause to the central place in the sentence, as in, “The people came to me [when I saw so-and-so],” that would be *naṣṣ* because it is [more obviously] what is intended. (Ibn Nujaym 1355/1936: 112–14)

One’s obligation is to act on the basis of what seems clear – with the possibility that there might be need for further reflection (*ta’wīl*). The *mufassar* (“interpreted”) text is even clearer than the *naṣṣ* since it allows no possibility of an alternative interpretation, since it has an absolutely determinative indicant joined to it; one acts according to it without any uncertainty; it can, however, be abrogated. The “determinative” (*muḥkam*) is a text whose intention is clear and there is no possibility of abrogation or substitution.

This hierarchy of clarity is not, however, a hierarchy of found texts but of texts reflected upon and put in context. The text of Q 4:3, “Marry of the women who seem good to you, two, or three, or four,” is, says Ibn Nujaym, manifest in its permission to marry, but because of the augmentary text – “two, or three, or four” – it is a *naṣṣ* text in its delimitation of the number of wives allowed. There is no linguistic space to read “two, or three, or four” as meaning “five, or six, or seven.” Q 9:36, “Wage war on all the idolaters,” closes the door of restrictions, though it is possible that the modifier “all” might have been abrogated. That is the only contestable space in the utterance. At the far end of linguistic certainty is the Qur’ānic tagline, found throughout the entire text, “God is of everything the Knower.” This is a determinative text. “It is best and most suitable to action as the clearest and strongest text.” This is a text with an emphatic “everything” that resists restriction and, for theological reasons, it is inconceivable that it could ever have been abrogated (Ibn Nujaym 1355/1936: 112–14). We see that in the Ḥanafī system, texts *in situ* do not signify by themselves; it is only when they are juxtaposed with other texts by an association that takes place in the mind of the legist that they acquire their effect.

Conclusion

The Qur’ān of the legists was, in some subtle and important ways, different from the “textual” Qur’ān, that is, “what is between the two covers.” First, it is an atomized Qur’ān, in which each little unit of meaning, each “pericope,” stands alone, with no presumptive link to verses around it. To assert that verses before or after a given verse constitute a context, the legist has to prove it; mere propinquity does not constitute context.

To atomize the Qur’ān is, oddly enough, to insert the traditional account of revelation and redaction into the text. The revelation of the Qur’ān is remembered by the community as a piecemeal affair: verses appeared in the context of situations, sometimes surprising Muḥammad, sometimes in response to his seeking guidance. The Qur’ān was not, however, the *Book of Mormon*, revealed all at once as an integral text. Thus, to deconstruct the text as legists do is to restore it to its state before the Ṭhmanīc

scribes stitched the Qurʾān together into a book – something between two covers. In that sense, the legists’ approach to the text is truer to revelation than, say, the reciter’s.

In the destabilized text of the legist, in which no verse can be presumed to mean only what it “says,” without further reflection, in which, in fact, both Qurʾānic and non-Qurʾānic material must be considered in order to understand a given Qurʾānic verse, the legist finds flexibility. This combination and recombination allows the legist to extend the scope of the Qurʾān to new cases, to read the Qurʾān in new ways, and, in effect, to restore the immanence of the Qurʾān to what would seem to be a transcendent, closed text. The legists’ approach also makes true literalism impossible. No text is read in isolation, as an isolated dictum laying down the law. Instead, it is recognized that meaning does not inhere in expressions in a simple, one-to-one way, but what is meant by a text may lie entirely outside the terms of its locutionary thrust. This realization makes true literalism impossible, or at least, unIslamic.

The hermeneutics of Islamic legal scholars has a great deal to teach us about scriptural hermeneutics in general. It also tells us how the Qurʾān functioned in the formation of both Islamic ideal and practice.

Notes

- 1 Al-Ghazālī (1995: I, 119) says: “Know that if we inquire correctly then there is only a single basis (*aṣl*) for juridical assessments (*aḥkām*), and that is the saying of God the most high. This is because the saying of the messenger [by itself] is not an assessment, nor is it compelling; rather it is information that God the most high has ruled such-and-such. Assessment is to God alone.”
- 2 Other definitions: Amīr Bādshāh (1350: III, 3): “The Book is the Qurʾān as utterance (*lafẓī*) that is, the Arabic utterance sent down that is plurally transmitted to order [humankind’s affairs] and to remind [humankind of God’s sovereignty, of salvation history, the apocalypse etc.];” al-Ghazālī (1995: I, 119): “The book is what is plurally transmitted to us between the two covers of the codex, in the seven well-known readings”; al-Ṭūfī (1408/1987: II, 5): “The book is His speech sent down to miraculously incapacitate [any one to produce] a chapter (*sūra*) of it – it is the Qurʾān. To define it as, ‘What is plurally transmitted between the two covers of the codex’ is a circular definition.”
- 3 There are some technical differences here. The Ḥanafīs as a whole maintain that the seven readings are *mashhūr*, that is, well known, but that their transmission does not rise to the level of plurally transmitted. The Shāfiʿīs maintain that the seven readings are plurally transmitted (al-Zarkashī 1413/1992: I, 466). Al-Zarkashī (1413/1992: I, 285) suggests that later scholars differentiated between the transmission of the text from the prophet to the *imāms*, which is *mashhūr*, and the transmission of the text from the seven reporting *imāms* to later Muslims, which is *mutawātīr*. This leads al-Ṭūfī (1408/1987: II, 21ff.) to the interesting suggestion that the Qurʾān (as God knows it) and the recited text are “two [different] realities.”
- 4 There is an interesting discussion following in al-Sarakhsī’s text on whether the Christian claim for the crucifixion as *mutawātīr* is sound.
- 5 For the theological anxiety caused by the lack of the *basmala* see al-Nīsābūrī (1962–4: X, 37–8).

- 6 Of the three, meaning seems least important for ritual purposes, however. See the discussion of sound and order by the two Ibn Qudāmas in Ibn Qudāma (1403/1983: I, 526ff.). Note that in that passage Abū 'Umar does mention that mispronunciation to such an extent that meaning is violated makes recitation invalid.
- 7 *Naẓm* – literally, an utterance; see al-Maḥbūbī and al-Taftazānī (1998: I, 73). On *naẓm* see *EI2* (2004: s.v.).
- 8 See Ḥasan (1989: chapter 3). There are also other pragmatic features discussed at length; see, e.g., al-Qarāfī (1393/1973: 270ff.).
- 9 For a discussion of hermeneutic tools and techniques already developed early in the history of Qur'ānic exegesis, see Versteegh (1993: chapter 4).
- 10 What follows is summary. I know of no concise introduction to this topic. Ali (2000) is useful, but does not cover all *uṣūl* concerns, and seems more focused on the appropriation of terminology and concepts from modern pragmatics into *uṣūl*. Weiss (1992) has by far the best discussion I know of in any European language. Weiss' philosophical background enables him to grasp, and clearly explain, all of the Shāfi'ī hermeneutical discussions in eye-crossing detail. As the title suggests, however, Weiss is drawing almost entirely from the *falsafa*-oriented work of al-Āmidī, who was a Shāfi'ī. Zysow (1984) has a thorough and characteristically lucid discussion of Ḥanafī hermeneutics. It is also quite long and detailed. I have benefited from these works and also from Ḥasan (1989).
- 11 The concept is somewhat complicated by al-Shāfi'ī's use of the term *naṣṣ* for a similar concept. Shāfi'īs were faced with what computer experts call "a legacy issue," and tended to retain the term in various meanings. The most common use was for an exceptionally clear *ẓāhir* text. See al-Zarkashī (1413/1992: I, 462–5). *Naṣṣ*, as we shall see, was also a technical term in Ḥanafī jurisprudence.
- 12 This is a pun, since bridal throne is *minaṣṣa*, and text is *naṣṣ*, from the same root.
- 13 A generic noun is a singular noun with the definite article; these, says the commentator, are general because the intent "is the genus...not some individuals [from among the class]."
- 14 There is dispute among the schools whether plurally transmitted Qur'ān can be qualified only by Qur'ān and plurally transmitted *sunna*, or whether suppositional (*ẓannī*) sources like consensus, analogy, or unitary (*aḥad*) *ḥadīth* can qualify the definitive sources. Shāfi'īs intend to affirm the idea. Ḥanafīs to deny it.
- 15 Translated referring to Pickthall (1938).
- 16 Example from Ḥasan (1989: 13), but his footnote 3 cites the wrong verse, and the text he cites in the text is slightly corrupt, taking the first word from Q 2:237.

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CHAPTER 36

Contemporary Ethical Issues

Leah Kinberg

The use of sacred scripts for polemic purposes is a method as ancient as the scripts themselves. Biblical citations, which are used as a vehicle to support a specific ideology, can be traced easily in various texts throughout history. For instance, like Jews and Christians, Muslims, from their earliest generations, have integrated scriptural verses into their writings. While finding recourse in holy scripts has been used to assert ultimate authority by all the monotheistic religions, the Qurʾān, with its unique style and language, created a kind of flexibility that has facilitated a wide range of observations and interpretations of the text. As a result, it enabled the believers to employ Qurʾānic verses to fit their lives at any given time and place. Muslims regard the Qurʾān as the word of God that was gradually revealed to Muḥammad to answer the needs and changing circumstances of the developing nascent community, but, although prophecy ended with Muḥammad's death, the search for compatibility between the revelation and current events did not stop then. Instead, it expanded to the next generations and became a central part of the type of Qurʾānic exegesis known as the "occasions of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). The purpose of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature was to add the missing details not mentioned by the verse in question and thereby clarify the message delivered in it.

The *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature constitutes a major part of Islamic teaching about the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān (*iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*), which treats it as a divine revelation that cannot be imitated by mortals, as an eternal and universal truth that can be adapted to changing circumstances, and as guidance to be applied to any situation. This may explain why, from the very first days of Islam till our own time, advice has always been sought from Qurʾānic verses, especially in controversial matters.

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A general impression of classical Islamic literature is that whenever there was a need to validate a custom or an idea, it was – first and foremost – associated with a Qur’ānic verse that could provide corroboration, then with an auxiliary prophetic statement (*ḥadīth*), and finally with other material. This pattern has not changed throughout the ages, and is widely demonstrated in present-day texts. Suffice it to mention the heavy use of Qur’ānic verses in speeches of Muslim leaders, in *fatwās*, during Friday sermons held in mosques all over the world, in official reports from Muslim countries, editorials or polemic articles in newspapers, and even within chats in online social networks. An examination of this material, which is easily accessible nowadays through the Web, opens a fascinating window onto a contemporary exegetical literature that follows the rationale of the classical *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

To demonstrate the usage of Qur’ānic verses in online discourse, a wide range of texts can be consulted. Radical Muslims use Qur’ānic verses to support aspects that touch upon the general idea of *jihād*, and the glossy English propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, issued by ISIS, is the best example of such online resources.¹ At the opposite end are the advocates of Islamic resilience and peace who deliver their message through Qur’ānic verses that admonish against violence and call for tolerance and patience.

The present study is a compilation of texts of the latter kind. The texts may deal with domestic issues or with global matters, and while addressing both Muslims and non-Muslims, they use Qur’ānic verses to support their arguments. Most of the texts accessed are written in English or Arabic, and others are English versions of material written in languages of different parts of the Islamic world. While the English texts are adduced as presented over the Web with no further editing, the Arabic texts have been translated and summarized. In spite of being retrieved from a wide range of sources written by various writers, their objective is the same: to refute the image of Islam as a violent religion and enhance its image by portraying it as *the* universal call for peace, equality, and pluralism.

I choose to concentrate in this chapter on excerpts that make use of a single Qur’ānic passage, verse 13 of chapter 49 (*Sūrat al-Hujurat*). Q 49:13 does not contain any dubious or extreme content and ordinarily would not draw special attention. The verse reads:

O Mankind, We have created you male and a female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware. (Arberry 1974)

The verse covers three aspects: first, it deals with individuals, men and women, and can be understood as calling for gender equality; second, it deals with the existence of different races and tribes and can be interpreted as a call for racial equality; and third, it concentrates on ethico-religious aspects, advising the believers to discern people by piety rather than by any other criterion.

In the chapter that I wrote for the first edition of the *Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*, I examined the distribution of this verse over the Web and showed the role it played in Islamic socio-political-religious discourse (Kinberg 2006). Today, ten years later, I have chosen to study the same verse again to see to what extent recent social and

political changes have had an effect on its popularity. In the following pages I will show the centrality of the verse in contemporary discussions associated with both the appealing and the confrontational expressions of Islam, the ruptures in the unity of the Islamic community, and the integration of Muslims with non-Muslims. I will focus on the increase of the interest and appeal of the verse and demonstrate the apologetic way in which it is often presented. First, however, I will survey the classical literature that elaborates the reasons for the revelation of the verse.

Classical Background

Classical literature of the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) often links the revelation of this verse with the conquest of Mecca (8/630), and recounts that when Muḥammad entered Mecca as a conqueror, he ordered Bilāl, a black slave, to summon people for prayer. Upon hearing this, several people expressed their resentment and named Bilāl “the black crow.” As a reaction, a verse that preaches equality of mankind and forbids boasting of one’s lineages was revealed. This was Q 49:13 (al-Wāḥidī 1968: 295–6).

A different account relates the revelation of the verse to Thābit b. Qays, a member of the Anṣār tribes of Medina. Thābit made a remark about the mother of a man who did not make room for him to sit. The prophet then admonished him and said: “Look at the faces of those present, what do you see?” Thābit said: “I see white, red and black people.” The prophet then said: “Well, you are not better than any of them unless it be through piety and God-fearing (*taqwā*)” (al-Wāḥidī 1968: 295).

A third case in point tells about a black slave who agreed to be sold only to a master who would let him perform the five prayers behind the messenger of God. After a while, a man bought the slave on this condition and the messenger of God indeed saw him at each prescribed prayer. One day he failed to see him and found out that the man had become ill and died. The prophet decided to take charge of his washing, shrouding, and burial, to the dismay of his companions from Mecca (*ṣaḥāba*) and the Medinan *anṣār*. At this point Q 49:13 was revealed to reproach the condescending attitude of the believers (al-Wāḥidī 1968: 296).

Sharing the same edifying purpose is a fourth anecdote, also presented as an “occasion of revelation”: the prophet ordered the tribe of Banū Bayāda to give in marriage to Abū Hind, their servant (*mawlā*), a woman from their tribe. They found it inappropriate and said: “Are we going to give our daughters in marriage to our servants (*mawālī*)?” God then revealed the verse (Qurṭubī 1965: XVI, 340).

At a later time, under entirely different circumstances, the Shu‘ūbiyya, the movement that proclaimed the equality of non-Arabs with Arabs among Muslims, adopted this verse as the source for their name (Goldziher 1967: 137). The Shu‘ūbis were often called Ahl at-Taswiyah, “the people [who advocate] equality,” and sometimes used the last part of Q 49:13 (“Truly the noblest among you before God is the most righteous”) as a cornerstone of their argument (Mottahedeh 1976: 164). Whether the spirit of equality of the verse was the reason for the Shu‘ūbis’ interest in it, or rather the “dispute over the nature of *shu‘ūb*,” as suggested by Mottahedeh, attention should be drawn to the context to which this verse was applied, which is different from the anecdotes presented above.

Modern-day Texts

The classical narrations presented as the reason(s) for the revelation of Q 49:13 focus on the central message of the verse. This is a double message, two parts that complement each other: the denunciation of the reverence of Jāhili lineage ties, and the abolishment of the differences between races. The message is often combined with the idea of equality delivered in Muḥammad's farewell sermon (*khutbat al-wadā'*), and, together with other Qur'ānic verses and prophetic statements, serves to attest to the egalitarian spirit of Islam. This idea, so well elaborated in early Islamic texts, can be witnessed extensively in texts that use the verse in reports of contemporary events.

Hundreds of texts choose to quote Q 49:13 to support their message. The verse is introduced either along with other Qur'ānic verses, or as a lone verse, and reference is made either to the whole verse or merely to one of its parts. In all cases, the verse is integrated into the text and construed to meet the needs and intentions of the writer. In the following pages I will show how modern texts choose to display Q 49:13 as a corpus of values such as pluralism, tolerance, and multiculturalism. The present study is dedicated to the middle part of the verse, which summons people "to get to know one another" (= *li-ta'arafū*). This call implies diversity of the kind that protects humankind from rivalry and hostility and encourages unity and peace, or in Sayyid Quṭb's words, harmony (*wi'ām*) and friendship (*ta'āruf*) rather than self-destruction (*intiḥār*) and dispute (*khiṣām*).²

The texts are divided according to the different aspects they cover:

- 1 Diversity as a means to promote pluralism and peace.
- 2 Diversity as a means to eradicate schism.
 - 2.1 Nationalism and tribalism.
 - 2.2 Sunnīs and Shī'ites.
 - 2.3 Racism and discrimination.
- 3 Diversity as a means to solve marital issues and unite people.
- 4 Diversity and attire.
- 5 Diversity and religions.
- 6 *Li-ta'arafū* as a catchphrase.
- 7 A different meaning.

1 Diversity as a means to promote pluralism and peace

In 2013, upon being asked for his opinion on Indonesia's diversity and interfaith experience, Dr. H. Marsudi Syuhud (currently General Secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia) explained the rationale behind the diversity of a population using Q 49:13 as one of his references:

The purpose for Allah to create men and women in the world with differences – in languages, in tribes, in religions – is for people to get to know each other better. The more we know each other, the lesser [*sic*] we encounter problems and conflicts with each other, and the more we are able to live together in peace.³

Similarly, in an interview by *al-Sharq al-Awsat* in April 2010, Ahmed al-Tayeb, the current Grand Imam of al-Azhar and former president of al-Azhar University, commented on the future of dialogue with the West, using Q 49:13 and relating it to diversity and pluralism as integral parts of Islam:

God Almighty did not desire [such] symmetry and standardization, and rather it was His will to create a diverse range of people ... if people want to live in peace wherever they are and regardless of creeds and culture then relations between them must be cooperative and based upon mutual respect, and God said in the Quran "O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another [Surat al-Hujirat; Verse 13].⁴

Nihad Awad, the executive director of CAIR (Counsel on American–Islamic relations), expressed a similar idea in an interview he gave to the Iqra satellite and Internet television channel (December 27, 2012). The following is an excerpt from his comments:

Islam's worldview is one of coexistence, of respect for pluralism, and of peace. Allah says in the Koran: "Oh Mankind! We have created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes so that you may know one another. The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the most pious among you." This is a very important humane, social, and political principle ... This verse was conveyed 1,400 years ago. This is a very important principle on how we should interact with others. As Muslims, we are not hostile to other societies ... Diversity in Islam is a good thing, not a shortcoming. Most of the wars waged between nations were the result of failure to respect and acknowledge the other.⁵

The above examination of the verse in general and the concept of *ta'aruf* in particular focus on the universality of Islam, to which Q 49:13 is fundamental. Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the founder and leading figure of the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) in Malaysia, elaborates on the universal message of the verse while encouraging the enhancement of harmony and peace. When reciting Q 49:13, he said:

Firstly, this verse is addressed not just to Muslims but to mankind. Secondly, it lays the foundation for unity and equality in every human being. We belong to one race, that is, the universal race of mankind. We have been divided into different tribes and nations so that we can get to know each other. Now, in the context of Malaysia where Muslims comprise the majority in our multi-cultural multi-religious society, Islam requires tolerance as the minimum standard to foster respect. But going by the Qur'anic verse just quoted, mere tolerance in a society like ours is not good enough. The Qur'anic expression *li-ta'arufi* requires a higher standard. It means to reach out and get to know each other.⁶

Attention should also be drawn to cases where the verse is taken beyond Islam to serve in global appeals for collaboration and peace. After all, it was President Obama who chose to use this verse to end the historic speech he gave at the University of Cairo on June 4, 2009:

It's easier to start wars than to end them. It's easier to blame others than to look inward. It's easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we

should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There's one rule that lies at the heart of every religion – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. (Applause.) This truth transcends nations and peoples – a belief that isn't new; that isn't black or white or brown; that isn't Christian or Muslim or Jew. It's a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world. It's a faith in other people, and it's what brought me here today.

We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning, keeping in mind what has been written. The Holy Koran tells us: "O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." The Talmud tells us: "The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace." The Holy Bible tells us: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." (Applause.) The people of the world can live together in peace ...⁷

Obama's recourse to Q 49:13 had an important follow-up. On July 27, 2010, thirteen months after his Cairo speech, Ali Gomaa, then the Grand Mufti of Egypt, said:

It is vital to rekindle the new spirit that accompanied Obama's speech and to discuss together how we can transform it into practical programmes that bridge the concept of dialogue with real and effective partnership between East and West ... The Qur'an teaches us: "We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another" (49:13). When God says to "know one another" He does not mean in order to kill one another. All religions have forbidden the killing of innocents. Rather, we have been ordered to cooperate in a constructive manner.⁸

2 Diversity as a means to eradicate schism

Recent developments in the Muslim world, such as increased hostility between people without showing any sign of bringing them together "to know each other," seem to challenge the inspired diversity of Q 49:13. This situation may explain the recent increase of references made to the verse and their formation of a new discourse that imparts a desperate call to rescue the image of Islam, where Q 49:13 is being utilized as a means to oppose and replace the ailments of our time.

Following the 2011 attack on Coptic Christians in Alexandria, Ali Gomaa declared:

The Islam that we were taught in our youth is a religion that calls for peace and mercy ... What we have learnt about Islam has been taken from the clear, pristine, and scholarly understanding of the Qur'an: "O people, we have created you from a single male and female and divided you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another" ... Terrorism, therefore, cannot be the outcome of any proper understanding of religion. It is rather a manifestation of the immorality of people with cruel hearts, arrogant souls, and warped logic.⁹

On April 9, 2015, *The Wall Street Journal* presented the similar resentment of Shawki Allam, the current Grand Mufti of Egypt, toward what he viewed as the ugly distortions of Islam made by radical groups.

These groups have the audacity to dismiss any Quranic verses that don't fit their claims. They declare unilateral war against both Muslims and non-Muslims who don't share their barbarous mentality. They completely disregard the Quranic conception of human brotherhood and peaceful relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, in the Quran, God says, "O Mankind. We created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other ..." (citing 49:13). The Quran urges the embrace of people from different religious affiliations, cultural backgrounds and racial origins. Yet the radical groups insist that anyone who rejects their extremist ideology is a legitimate target who may be killed.¹⁰

ISIS's declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 seems to have increased the anxiety and consequently expanded the references to Q 49:13 as a means to refute any connection between ISIS and Islam. These references try to promote a non-belligerent message of Islam.

Irfan al-Alawi, International Director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism, lists religious, historical, and political reasons why Sunnis should reject the call of the "Islamic State." While reciting Q 49:13 he says:

The idea that borders between Syria and Iraq will be dissolved by the new "caliphate" defies all of Islamic theology and history. As the Qur'an states in surah 49:13, Allah "made the nations and tribes different." Muslims from the Balkans to the Philippines vary in customs and culture. These distinctions have always existed and were never overcome by any previous caliphate. They are reflected in the existence of the many modern state borders.¹¹

The following comments by Cheikh Hassen Chalghoumi, then the head of France's Imam Forum, under the title "Waging a global war against the Islamic State (ISIS) and other extremist groups," expresses similar sentiments:

We now see killings and violence on a daily basis – ethnic cleansing in Central Africa, campaigns by Boko Haram against Muslim Nigeria and its Christian population, and ISIS, which is wreaking havoc on earth. All these crimes are unfortunately committed in the name of Islam. The Union of Peoples for Peace aims at ensuring peaceful co-existence among various religions, cultures and identities ... There is a Qur'anic verse that says: "And [we] made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other." Contrary to what criminal groups such as ISIS are saying, all men should love and live together, regardless of their religion, race or colour ... I urge those who care about Islam to join our voice against that cancer, which is threatening our security and is trying to kill us and our youth. (Interview by Mohamed Saadouni in Marrakech, November 21, 2014)¹²

Similarly, when the Sheikh Abd al-Latif Deryan was elected as the Grand Mufti of the Lebanese Republic in September 2014, he condemned the recent enmity between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon, which he said was very different from the coexistence that prevailed between the two groups for 1,400 years. In this context he quoted Q 49:13, and while focusing on the meaning of *ta'aruf*, he rhymed: "[you are supposed to] know one another (*li-ta'arufū*) and not fight each other (*li-ta'arakū*)."¹³

Radical Islamists are not the only groups that stimulate furious expressions within mild Islamic circles. Nationalism, tribalism, Sunnī–Shī‘ī rivalries (with or without reference to ISIS), and racism have a similar effect.

2.1 Nationalism and tribalism

Nationalism, by definition, disrupts the unity of the “*umma*,” which has come to refer to the community of Muslim believers. The following excerpts convey a strongly negative approach toward nationalism, and stress the need to eradicate any possible association with Islam while finding recourse in the spirit of unity nourished by diversity, as implied in Q 49:13.

The “Ballandalus” blog includes the following in a post entitled “‘Asabiyya: The Role of Muslims in the Decline of Islamic Civilization,” from August 17, 2012:

The outbreak of ethnic violence between Uzbek and Kyrgyz residents of the Central Asian Kyrgyz Republic in October 2010 shocked the world. The violence, which left over 2000 killed, tens of thousands wounded, and over 275,000 displaced, was an inevitable consequence of modern nationalism and racial hatred, and was all the more saddening given the ethno-linguistic affinity between the two groups – both of whom are Turkic – and, more importantly, the fact that they are both Muslim. The Uzbek–Kyrgyz violence was merely a symptom of a deeper problem in the *Ummah*, namely that of the deviation from the Islamic principle of unity and the revival of the ‘*asabiyya* of *jahiliyya*. As Muslims, we must constantly remind ourselves of the centrality of unity in Islam and the danger which disunity possesses to the very existence of our *Ummah* ... In the Qur’an, it is stated: “O mankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you.” (Q. 49:13). This verse, among the most widely cited from the Qur’an, establishes that although humanity is undeniably divided into nations and tribes, these various groups should strive to unite and interact with one another.¹⁴

The Turkish author and Islamic leader Harun Yahya expressed similar sentiments, using Q 49:13, in a 2014 article entitled “Tribalized States or Tribes That Are Effectively States in the Middle East”:

The Yemenis must abandon divisions and differences and remember the fact that all Muslims are “brothers.” They must act as a role model to the world with the moral values this spiritual brotherhood brings with it. The spirit of brotherhood between believers is a gift and a blessing from Allah; Yemenis must therefore give thanks to Allah for this blessing and not forget His command “not to separate.” In verse 13 of Surat al-Hujurat, Almighty Allah states that He has created differences between people as a means for them to come to know one another, not as a source of conflict. Allah wants Muslims to compete in good deeds, not to fight each other because of their differences. Members of tribes in Yemen must begin at once working for the good of all Muslims. Only then can Yemen strengthen its democracy as a secure and prosperous country.¹⁵

When dealing with the differences between Yemen and Turkey in “Two countries geographically far apart but very close in heart and soul,” Harun Yahya uses Q 49:13 again:

Yemen has many more tribes when compared with other Arab countries, and there are serious conflicts among them: It is even possible to say they operate as autonomous states among themselves. Indeed, someone from one tribe will not be allowed to work in a facility owned by another; this of course has a negative impact in economic and political terms. Yet Almighty God, Who creates the members of all tribes, reveals that superiority lies not in being a member of a tribe, but in fearing Him: “Mankind! We created you from a male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you might come to know each other. The noblest among you in God’s sight is the one with the most fear of God. God is All-Knowing, All-Aware”.¹⁶ (Sūrat al-Hujurāt, 13)

And finally, ISIS’s English-language magazine (*Dabiq*) quotes Abū ‘Umar al-Baghdādī (leader of the Islamic State of Iraq who died in 2010 and was succeeded by Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī) speaking about nationalism:

The idea of nationalism and patriotism contradicts the religion in a number of its fundamentals. First, preferring people to others is in accordance with their piety not their blood. Allah (*ta’ālā*) said, {O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you} [Al-Hujurāt: 13].¹⁷ (*Dabiq*, April 2015, pp. 7–8)

2.2 *Sunnīs and Shī’ites*

On July 19, 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, gave a speech entitled “We Must Follow the Path of Peace and Unity,” in which he expressed his dismay at the recent rivalry between Sunnīs and Shī’ites, using Q 49:13 as follows:

Recent developments in the Muslim world have led to a heightening of tensions between Sunnīs and Shias. In Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, extremists have gone so far as to kill each other in the name of Islam. Those who declare other Muslims apostates and kill them in the name of the Sunnī or Shī’ite sects are violating the basic principles of Islam ...

Instead of fighting against each other, Muslims need to fight against injustice, inequality, poverty, illiteracy, corruption, and underdevelopment. We must turn our cities and countries into centers of learning, innovation, creativity, and coexistence. We should see our differences as a source of enriching and empowering each other. We should remember why God created people differently: “O humankind! We created you from a male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes that you may know each other. Truly the most honored of you before God is the most pious of you.” (49:13)¹⁸

Ani Zonneveld of Muslims for Progressive Values addressed Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz in an open letter on February 20, 2015, complaining about the rupture of

Islamic unity. Like all the other texts of this kind, the desire to unite all the believers is supported by Q 49:13.

The divisive sectarianism and ideology of Islamic Sunni supremacy is sickening. We are tired of the infighting, the dehumanizing of “the other” at the *minbar* (mosque pulpit), the talk of *takfir* (excommunicating of fellow Muslims) and the slaughter of “the other” by assuming a God-like role as the judge and the punisher. There were no Sunni, Shia or other sects during Muhammad’s time, but there were believers of many faiths, nonbelievers and even pagans, all residing in dignity in your country – protected by the prophet.

The Quran teaches us all people are equal in the eyes of God: “We have created you men and women, into nations and tribes for you to learn from each other. Surely, the most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most righteous.” (Quran 49:13). Imagine a Saudi Arabia where all people can come together to exchange ideas freely and share in our humanity.¹⁹

2.3 Racism and discrimination

In commemoration of the forty-ninth anniversary of the death of Malcolm X, Mustapha Elturk, the Imam and President of the Islamic Organization of North America (IONA) in Warren, Michigan, dedicated his Friday sermon on February 20, 2015 to the event, and propagated the Qur’ānic message of equality while reciting Q 49:13:

February is Black History Month in America. The history of the African people and their freedom from slavery is commemorated and remembered during this month. The well-known human rights activist Malcolm X met his fate in the same month 49 years ago ...

Islam promotes absolute equality and fraternity among the human race regardless of one’s skin color or faith. The notion of equality and brotherhood is articulated in a very profound way in *surat al-Hujurat*, “O mankind! We created you (all) from a male and a female and made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Surely, the most honorable among you with Allah is the most righteous. Verily, Allah is all-knowing, all-aware” (*al-Hujurat*, 49:13).²⁰

On December 4, 2014, in her reaction to the murder of Michael Brown (August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri), Paola Garcia, a lawyer and consultant in New York City, who embraced Islam in 2013, chose to cite Malcolm X’s words in 1964 when he performed the *hajj*: “America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem.” Garcia further explains:

Through his study of Islam and his personal experiences as a Muslim, Malcolm X gained a strong conviction that the problems of racism that would “lead America up the suicide path” could be resolved through Islam ... Today, as we continue to battle the disease of racism, his letter’s insights are as critical as they were fifty years ago. Malcolm X sought to share with his fellow Americans the Islamic principles of racial equality. In Islam, race is irrelevant and never to be used as a parameter to judge a person’s value. According to the Quran ... God created all humans “from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made [us]

into peoples and tribes, that [we] may know each other” and “... the most honored of [humans] in the sight of God is he who is most righteous ...” (49:13) ... [T]he division of people into nations and races has the purpose of having us know each other and, after doing so, come together as human beings. There is only one criterion by which a person’s value is determined: good character.²¹

In addition to racism outside the Muslim world, Q 49:13 is often cited in the fight against racist phenomena and discrimination within the Islamic world, such as in the article published in the *Saudi Gazette* of November 26, 2014 by Al-Hanouf Al-Qahtani:

Some people just like to categorize others according to race, social class, color, and financial status ... What gives one the right to act snobbish toward others? Allah says in the Holy Qur’an: “Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you.” (49:13). Only righteousness and piety can justify any type of preference. Racists are ignorant. Racism begets nothing but conflicts and hostility. Persecution in the name of religion is unacceptable ... Holding men in high esteem and degrading women is a despicable thing. It is painful how some mistreat and discriminate against expatriate workers just because they do not belong to this country. It is painful to use certain names to label people with dark complexions, names that detract from their human value.²²

3 Diversity as a means to solve marital issues and unite people

The first part of Q 49:13, which deals with the creation of men and women from the same essence, is often interpreted to indicate the Islamic call for gender equality. When connecting this part with the other parts of the verse, we get a strong notion of social equality. People are not distinguished by gender (first part), nor by race or lineal affiliation (second part), but rather by righteousness (third part). The idea of gender equality in relation to the other parts of the verse underlies numerous texts that try to refute the prevalent belief of discrimination against women in Islam. These, however, are not the texts that I will examine. I will rather present texts that have recourse to our verse in order to answer individual questions concerning marital relationships. Such texts can be traced in Q&A sites, where people, mainly men, address the sheikh with individual matters, or in private stories presented through the Web. The following is a collection of three personal cases that touch upon the issue of compatibility in marriage in light of the relatively new conditions encountered by Muslims living in non-Islamic countries.

Q. “My question is what does it mean when Allah says I have separated you in tribes and nations so that you can recognize one another? Is this talking about the caste system (where caste has been referred as tribes) that many people believe in today’s world? There are many young Muslims in the UK who take great interest in their religion but are very confused about following and believing in the caste system. Many families have fallen apart due to the strong belief many parents have in their caste. This problem arises more often when looking for a spouse for marriage. I have become conscious that parents strictly find it necessary that their children’s marriages should not occur outside their own caste.

Does Islam separate Muslims in different groups and not allow marriage connections with one another? ... Young Muslims like myself would like to follow Islam the best we can and have the blessings of Allaah and on the other hand keep our parents happy and have the blessings from our parents.”

A. “The verse that you are referring to is the saying of Allaah (which means): {O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the Most honourable of you with Allaah is that one who has At-Taqwa (God’s fear)}[49:13]. This verse affirms that all mankind are equal, and that Allaah does not look to our race or colour, but to our piety and righteous actions. Being of a different race or colour is only in order to know each other. That’s why according to the most preponderant opinion of the scholars, may Allaah have mercy upon them, what has to be taken into account as a characteristic for the suitability of marriage is religion and good moral character.”²³

An individual who converted to Islam five years ago met a girl he wanted to marry, but encountered some difficulties. He addresses the sheikh as follows:

Q. “... She is a practicing Muslimah from an Indian/Asian/Pakistani/Bengali type of background, and it is typical of people of these backgrounds never to let their children (especially girls) to marry outside their own cultures even if the one proposing is a practicing Muslim man. Hence the marriage cannot take place on this basis alone. Since the majority of practicing Muslims in this country are from the Indian subcontinent background, I have two questions:

1. How does a relative newcomer such as myself get married?
2. Should reverts only marry reverts? Is there any basis for such cultural separation in Islam?

In his answer the sheikh presents several Qur’ān verses and prophetic statements. When he cites Q 49:13, he says:

A. “... it should become clear to you that Islam does not discriminate between one Muslim and another by any earthly standards, whether that be colour, lineage, wealth or country. Rather the only criterion by which people are regarded as superior to others before Allaah is taqwa (piety, consciousness of Allaah).”²⁴

In the American-based site About Islam, Suzana Nabil Saad, a freelance writer, put together a few pieces about racism under the topic “Love You My Chinese Husband – Your Arab Wife” (January 6, 2016). The story that gave the name to the whole text tells of an American Muslim woman of Arab origin who married a Chinese Muslim man:

As an Arab American Muslim raised in a tight knit Arab Muslim community, my marriage to a Muslim of Chinese background came as a bit of a shock to many in our community. I remember my parents receiving comments such as, “how can you allow your daughter to marry like this? The rest of our girls are going to want to marry outside of us now. Growing up I realized that there was a double standard, many of the non-Arab individuals accepted into the community were female, Caucasian, and had married Arab men, but

rarely did I see an Arab woman marry outside of her culture. This attitude is diametrically opposed to what our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught his companions, to marry outside their families and tribes. As Allah Almighty explains in the Quran: {O Mankind, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you.} (Al-Hujuraat 49:13). Having been married now for over seven years, there is a greater cultural challenge that you encounter being married to someone from a different background, but the benefits of learning another culture, language, and ability to see the world from a different perspective far outweigh the challenges ...²⁵

4 *Diversity and attire*

Diversity as presented in Q 49:13 implies unity. Questions which Muslims have confronted are: "Does unity mean uniformity, how far is it from stereotypification, and should it leave room for individualism?" The following are three opinions about the ramifications of diversity.

Shamsuddin Waheed, the Imam of the Masjid al-Islam mosque in Toledo, Ohio, who is prolific online, cited Q 49:13 in his blog under the title, "Do not stereotype, because God made us all to carry and embody differences." Shamsuddin applies the idea of diversity of Q 49:13 to different levels of piety among Muslims, revealed in different details of attire:

To stereotype, spread false impressions in order to benefit politically, is immoral. It is rebellion against the Divine Imperatives. Stereotyping even occurs within the same community. In a Muslim context, Non-Hijabis stereotype Hijabis. A brother with a beard sees his beardless counterpart as shameful, the beardless one sees his bearded friend as radical, someone not wearing a tie is uneducated, and on and on. God says he made us all different, and those differences exist for a reason ... This is the Divine plan.²⁶

Muslim convert Paola Garcia uses Q 49:13 also to argue that wearing the veil is not required in Islam:

The universality of Islam invalidates the claim that veiling of any kind is mandatory for all Muslim women, and, for that matter, negates the notion of particular clothing requirements for all Muslims. The Quran states "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another" (49:13). The Quran recognizes and accepts cultural differences. It is hardly a controversial statement that clothing is among the most salient manifestations of culture. (Had God intended uniformity of dress upon embracing Islam, the Quran would have indicated so, but it most definitely does not) ... It is important to note that I am not opposing or criticizing a woman's decision to cover her hair or to dress in a particular way for a wide variety of reasons ... However, the idea that all Muslim women are required by Islam to veil themselves (in any form) is false and damaging to women, to Islam and to people who might otherwise consider accepting Islam as their faith.²⁷

Amira, a 19-year-old Egyptian-American, in an article in the Muslim online lifestyle magazine *Aquila Style*, talks about tattoos and Islam. In referring to Q 49:13, she takes “diversity” in a different direction:

Our body is a gift from Allah, and as that we should respect it. However, this does not imply uniformity, as human diversity is a way for us to “know one another” (49:13). I do not believe we all have to dress the same and be squeezed into this little box that our society or community thinks is acceptable. I believe that expressing our diversity and personality, and using the blessings that God gave us, is the best way to respect and honour the gift he has given us.²⁸

5 Diversity and religions

In an article published on June 23, 2011 in the Egyptian government daily *Al-Ahram*, Ahmad Al-Tayeb, the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, expressed his views toward non-Muslims in the following way:

[R]eligions and creeds vary and it shall remain so until God inherits the earth and all that is on it. We can say that the variety of creeds and the persistence [of this variety] is both a Koranic truth and a universal one. Therefore, a Muslim cannot imagine all of mankind sharing a single creed or turning to a single religion – even if this religion is Islam. As long as this remains the case, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims [must be] one of mutual recognition. This is what the Koran stipulated in an explicit and unambiguous text, saying: “Mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the most pious. Allah is the Knower, the Wise [Koran 49:13].”²⁹

Such calls are widely disseminated throughout the Web, and the number of interfaith programs is countless. Here, however, only one example is adduced.

Two weeks before Christmas 2012 Ibrahim Hooper, the National Communications Director for CAIR, published his commentary under the title “Jesus and Muhammad are Brothers,” ending with the following statement:

Obviously, Muslims and Christians have differing interpretations of the details of the life and message of Jesus. But by focusing on what we have in common, Christians and Muslims of goodwill can help build bridges of interfaith understanding and serve as a counterweight to the voices of division and extremism. As the Quran tells us: “O humankind! We have created you male and female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you” (49:13).³⁰

The message conveyed through the above-cited appeal reflects an urgent need, genuine and apologetic at the same time, to protest against manifestations of intolerance toward other faiths. Q 49:13 is one of the verses that Muslims embrace naturally in order to achieve this.

6 *Li-ta'ārafū* as a catchphrase

As popular as Q 49:13 is in its entirety, its central phrase, *li-ta'ārafū*, is the most frequently used over the Internet. High awareness of its meaning and familiarity with its connotations, along with the emotions embedded in it, have turned it into a catchphrase. No wonder, therefore, that many social sites choose *li-ta'ārafū* as their name.³¹

A student club named *li-ta'ārafū*, whose members are students of engineering at the University of Cairo, gathered together to call for knowledge exchange with Germany. They advertise their desire for intellectual exchange on Facebook while presenting a world map, in which the word *li-ta'ārafū* unites different kinds of people from various parts of the world.³²

Other Facebook accounts present the term *li-ta'ārafū* integrated into their cover photos, either with pictures³³ or with the term itself in a variety of calligraphy styles. Such accounts are often organized to promote their initiatives.

A social plan to bring together all the people scattered throughout Saudi Arabia chose the word *li-ta'ārafū* to describe its actions,³⁴ an educational institute that offers a variety of teaching measures, especially English classes, uses the name academy of *ta'aruf*,³⁵ and a program developed for pilgrims who arrive in Macca uses *ta'ārafū* together with *ta'ālafū* (to be in harmony with each other) as the name of their Facebook account.³⁶

The University and College in Petaling Java, Malaysia, calls for *ta'aruf* week “in the spirit of one *ummah* and religiosity” as part of a more general program developed in Kuala Lumpur under the name World #QuranHour.³⁷

Each one of the above accounts uses *li-ta'ārafū* as a slogan to enhance better relationships between people, with no reference to the verse. It seems that this Qur'ānic term by itself is sufficient to deliver the compassionate spirit of Islam.

Nevertheless, other accounts that choose the name *li-ta'ārafū* do quote the verse. Such is the following Egyptian account. It holds a collection of pictures and graphics that focus on *li-ta'ārafū* as a banner of kindness and empathy. While elaborating on the purpose of the account, it declares:

We envision deeper understanding between all human beings
 We wish acceptance and tolerance be the blossoms of our communities
 We aim to face the ongoing discrimination and misunderstanding happening everywhere
 from the “Majority” on everyone else
 We embrace the other
 we don't see the world in black and white
 however, we try to see the in-between
 O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and
 tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah
 is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.
 Alhujurat 13.
 Holy Quran (49:13)³⁸

7 A different meaning

As this study shows, contemporary texts use Q 49:13 to call attention to the fact that differences among people reflect the will of God, and actually encourage mutual care, understanding, and tolerance of all people. These texts treat *ta'āruf* as the paramount value of Islamic ethics, the ultimate Islamic call for mutual understanding and tolerance. This, however, does not suggest that all factions of Islam are unanimous in the interpretation of the universal message of the verse. As the duty to “know one another” does not extend necessarily to other religions, and the spirit of equality does not preclude an approach of disparity toward non-Muslims, an unequivocal approach is not expected. To prove this point and to allow some counterbalance to the harmonious approach presented so far, I would like to conclude this chapter with two examples (the only two that I could trace) that take our verse to a less idyllic sphere and show that, in certain circles, Q 49:13 may differentiate Muslims from other people, whether on a religious basis or a political one.

An edition of the al-Qā'ida-related journal *Şawt al-Jihād* (no. 23, 2004) includes an article by Abd Al-Rahman Ibn Salem Al-Shamari praising the beheading of an Egyptian citizen in Iraq. The author emphasized that a Muslim is obligated to be loyal to his religion only, and not to his national identity or to his country:

Monotheism and its obligations are prior to all other obligations, relations, or languages. Monotheism is the allegiance [to Allah], and Allah is He “who made you into nations and tribes, so that you might get to know one another. The noblest of you in Allah's sight is he who fears Him most.” But the infidel is an infidel whether he is an Arab or a non-Arab. He must be seen as an enemy. Furthermore, this is one of the fundamental principles of monotheism and one of the foundations of Islam.³⁹

The second example, which deals with a controversial statement made in 2008, is discussed over the Web even today. The preacher Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, associated with *Ḥizb-al-Tahrīr* (a controversial organization banned by the National Union of Students in the United Kingdom), found recourse in Q 49:13 to condemn democratic principles and to advocate a *sharī'a* state.

In a video made in 2008, he said: “We as Muslims reject the idea of freedom of speech, and even the idea of freedom.” He went on to explain that once Muslims live under the caliphate and understand its system, they engage with each other in a positive and productive way, as the Qur'ān says, “to get to know one another.” When life under the caliphate is enabled, he says, the idea of freedom is unnecessary.⁴⁰

Conclusions

Pluralism, diversity, tolerance, equality – these are but a few aspects that find their way into the modern study of Q 49:13. The message of the verse has come a long way. From a call to accept the appointment of the black slave Bilāl as the first muezzin of the

young Islamic community to the denunciation of racism in the United States of America; from a call against tribal solidarity in pre-Islamic times to disapproval of modern nationalism; from a warning not to differentiate people on a genealogical basis to arguments about social status and rank; from a seventh-century desert environment to a twenty-first-century global world. While the change seems tremendous, in Muslim eyes the verse has always held all these associations. Due to a notion of a perfect collaboration of the verse with contemporary events, a new concept such as pluralism should not be considered new to those who are familiar with the Qur'ān (as suggested by Zafar Siddiqui⁴¹). In other words, the spirit delivered through Q 49:13 functions as a second nature for Muslims who know the Qur'ān. This brings us back to the heart of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the occasions of revelation literature, the special kind of Qur'ān commentary that examines the historical/communal background of the verses. Having confidence in the universal and eternal Word of God, Muslim scholars let the idea of divine guidance extend to the following generations, and in so doing allowed people at any given time to find their own aspirations in the Qur'ānic text.

This process underlies the adjustment of Q 49:13 to the new circumstances created by the demographic changes that have taken place in the world, with masses of Muslims living among non-Muslims in non-Islamic countries. What is often understood by non-Muslims as a clash of civilizations has been interpreted by Muslims to be a harmonious process of integration: Q 49:13, among other verses, has stimulated statements such as those heard in the Topkapi Declaration of 2006: "Following the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the high standard which it sets, Muslims can enrich Europe as exemplary members of society and role models of decency and goodness."⁴²

The message of Q 49:13 has thus turned to play a central role in the Islamic *dā'wā* to encourage Muslims to set an example for non-Muslims while following the duty "to get to know each other." eL-Seed, a Tunisian artist, who tries to connect Arabic calligraphy with graffiti, promotes in his art a universal message of tolerance with a strong Arab identity. Not long ago he painted the text of Q 49:13 along the minaret of the mosque in his hometown, Gabes. "What I liked most about this verse," said eL-Seed in 2014, "is that it was not only addressed to the Muslim community but it was a universal message, an invitation for people with different opinions and from different religions and backgrounds to meet and understand each other in spite of their differences."⁴³

As significant as these ideas may be, the examination of Q 49:13 along ethical lines while focusing on the features Islam shares with the West is not the only reason, and probably not the main one, for the heavy usage of the verse. In my opinion, the frequent recourse to Q 49:13 in the twenty-first century should be understood as part of the Islamic struggle, sometimes a desperate one, to change its image. As shown above, by incorporating Q 49:13 into their media communications, the writers strive to affirm Islam as a moderate religion rather than a radical one, peace-loving rather than hate-mongering. Such endeavors seem prone to failure against the media's predisposition to focus on the lethal features of Islam for a public that can easily be carried away. The writers, however, do not intend to give up. The dynamic of the process therefore is as expected: as the assaults become more acute, the more vigorous is the utilization of the verse.

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CHAPTER 37

Narrative Literature

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Translated by Elizabeth Molinari

If we look at Islam and try to identify a foundational element in its tradition, one that is destined to leave an exact mark on Islamic history, we are obliged to choose between the Qurʾān and the example of the life of Muḥammad. In this chapter we will concentrate on the former and retrace evidence of the legacy of the Qurʾān, restricting our focus to the sphere of a literary legacy, or in other words, the mark left by Qurʾān narratives on Islamic Arabic literature. The Qurʾān is at the heart of Islamic history and culture, holding authority, inspiring concepts, behavior, definitions, visions, and, above all, literature, more than any other aspect in Islamic life. Every genre of Islamic literature is therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, the fruit of an acquired and elaborated Qurʾānic legacy. Be it poetry or juridical casuistry, the Qurʾān permeates nearly every page (see Zubaidi 1983: 334–9 on the Qurʾān’s legacy also in profane literature). In the theological ideal, all Islamic literature is to be the fruit of a direct or indirect exegetical path, or owes at least an explicit or implicit reference to the sacred text.

Ideals, however, will remain ideal if they are unachievable models of perfection. If it is true that everything that is conceived, realized, or written must conform to the word of the sacred text, this also means finding “justification” and backing in the Qurʾān for concepts that are unrelated to it. Yet, it is of little importance that authors of the Islamic age adhere to the Qurʾān as a formal expedient to diffuse literature that in effect only refers to the Qurʾān instrumentally: the cultural model survives even when it becomes artificial or affected, if we can call affected the recourse to the word of an omnipotent God. What holds for Islam and the Qurʾān holds also for literature: its scope – at least the scope intended by the founders of Islamic traditionalism – is life as a whole and not just a restricted cultural and ritualistic sphere.

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The relationship between the Qur'ān and subsequent literature is necessarily composite. The Qur'ān can directly condition literary discourse or it can function as an unrelated point of reference to reinvigorate other concepts and ideas. Islamic literature, like any tradition of religious literature, offers cases for each of these – traditions deriving directly and logically from the sacred text, others that adhere to its contents, and others still that are totally unrelated to it. This chapter will evaluate the Qur'ān on the one hand and religious literature on the other, to identify where the former has influenced the latter or where the latter has absorbed elements of the former. This relationship is obviously determined in part by the choice of individual authors in the course of the history of the literary tradition as a whole. Exploration of the literary legacy of the Qur'ān is also a question of the exegetical style and method of each author in his approach to the Qur'ān, to use it, to refer to it frequently or to completely ignore it, but either way to keep it present at all times. Nevertheless, the liberty of the author-exegete is not unlimited. To a significant extent the relationship is also determined by the nature of the Qur'ānic word on the topic under consideration. Where there is an ample supply of verses on a particular topic in the Qur'ān, reference to these becomes inevitable, and, at times, the distinctive quality of a particular author is characterized merely by the number of citations he makes.

As mentioned above, this chapter will not be looking at the legacy of the entire sacred text, but only at the legacy of Qur'ān narratives. A preliminary hurdle is one of definition. A univocal definition of Qur'ān narrative is problematic owing to the nature and style of the Qur'ānic text. Other genres, such as the juridical parts, are more easily distinguishable. It would almost be easier to proceed by elimination. An approved method is that of identifying Qur'ān narratives with verses that are historical in character.¹ Indeed, the Qur'ān relates events or issues that are true, that are factual history, and that are to be believed precisely because they took place or will occur in the history of the world (Leder 1998: 39–40). Moreover, there is no room for professedly fantastical narratives or explicative parables. The historical character is manifest in the condemnation of the *asāṭīr al-awwālīn*, the fantastical stories that the Qur'ān sets itself against. The Qur'ān narratives are thus narratives with a historical subject matter and are related in particular to three categories – or moments – of history: the past, the present, and the future (Rosenthal 2002: 430–9). The past and the future are awarded the most space and careful attention. Of the 6,000-plus verses that make up the Qur'ān, just over 1,500 are dedicated to the past, to the stories of the patriarchs and prophets, while 1,700 mention eschatological issues (Platti 2002: 174). Reference to the present consists in allusions to the mission of Muḥammad and is less frequent than the other categories. Polemical references to unbelievers and Jews cannot be included in this category because here, for a question of style among other things, the Qur'ān does not mention them in connection with the life of Muḥammad.

In this chapter, we will try to define the relationship between the Qur'ān and post-Qur'ānic literature within each of the genres that developed from the three historical moments identified in the Qur'ān. In other words, we will explore Islamic literature that covers pre-Islamic history, the life of the prophet, and the eschatological future.

The aim, therefore, is to draw some general conclusions about the relationship between certain literary works written over time and the Qurʾān, and to ascertain the extent to which the sacred text influenced or determined the distinctive qualities of such literature.²

Past: The Stories of the Prophets

The Qurʾān mentions the past mainly by reference to the prophets that preceded the mission of Muḥammad. These figures coincide almost entirely with those from the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, roughly from Adam to Jesus and his apostles (see Tottoli 2002: 3–79). These references cannot be described as sporadic, given that a quarter of the Qurʾān is taken up with these stories. The sheer number of references to these figures and their importance in terms of establishing the definition of prophecy in Islam have determined the considerable role assigned to them in post-Qurʾānic literature. Reference to patriarchs and prophets can thus be found in abundance and in different ways, in all the literary genres.

The most significant aspect to emerge in the literature related to the stories of the prophets is, undoubtedly, the definition of a linear chronology. The Qurʾān presents passages in open order, with frequent repetitions of the same episode in more than one *sūra*. Islamic literature, however, rapidly defined a chronological path from creation to the threshold of the advent of Muḥammad within which to arrange Qurʾānic data and narrative material of different origin. This occurs mainly in historiography, or rather, in history books and in the first books specifically dedicated to the lives of the prophets, the so-called *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. If, in historiography, the succession of prophets constitutes the initial stage of a history based on three periods – prophets, Muḥammad, and Islamic history – the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* represent a type of genre limited to the description of the first among these. Here, in a temporal and literary space that goes from creation to the advent of Muḥammad, medieval Islamic authors gather stories and traditions of different kinds to alternate with and link to Qurʾānic verses and passages.

The distinctive features of the genre of the stories of the prophets, and the relationship between Qurʾānic and extra-Qurʾānic material, are made explicit in what is considered to be the most significant *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* written by Abū Ishāq al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035). It was composed in the first half of the eleventh century, when the literary genres had already been defined and when some of the works destined to acquire greatest prestige had already been written. In his *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, having met the requirement of an initial eulogy, al-Thaʿlabī dedicates a couple of pages to introducing the work and begins with the quotation of Q 11:120, “And all that We relate to thee of the tidings of the messengers is that whereby We strengthen thy hearth.” There then follows a passage ascribed vaguely to some sages, according to which God had five reasons to reveal to Muḥammad the stories of the prophets that preceded him. These reasons are not explained on the basis of the content of the Qurʾān, but each of the five points contains at least one Qurʾānic passage that corroborates what has been

stated (al-Thaʿlabī 1954: 2–3; Brinner 2002: 3–5). An example, taken from Brinner’s translation (2002: 5), further clarifies al-Thaʿlabī’s method:

The fifth is that He told him the stories of the preceding prophets and saints to keep their memory and legacy alive, so that those who do well in keeping the saints’ memory alive assure themselves thereby a speedy reward in this world, in order that the saints’ good renown and legacy may remain forever, just as Abraham, the friend of God, desired the preservation of his good reputation and said: “And let me have a good report with posterity” (Q 26:84). For men are tales – it is said that no man dies but mention of him revives him.

The close ties of this literary genre with the Qurʾān are thus stated from the introductory pages of the work. It is also interesting to trace the actual use of the sacred text. Al-Thaʿlabī cites the Qurʾān with a certain frequency, even though, for a work on this scale, these quotations represent only a small part of the text (Calder 1993: 15). In most cases, passages are inserted in the traditions gathered within the chapters, while at other times a chapter begins with a verse from the Qurʾān prefixed by “God Almighty said.” These introductions are then followed by the quoted verse from the Qurʾān and then a story is introduced with the names of the “authorities” or “sages,” “those who know the stories,” “experts,” or “narrators.” These two uses of citations from the Qurʾān do not seem to be systematically defined in the text. For example, not all chapters dedicated to the prophets start with a citation prefixed by “God Almighty said.” This formal structure appears preferential when minor prophets are discussed, in a way that suggests that a citation from the Qurʾān provides justification for the story itself and its inclusion in the work. Nonetheless, even in the biographies of Moses and Jesus, and in these particularly, a number of passages that are dedicated to individual events in their lives are introduced in this way.³ Thus perhaps the most striking aspect of al-Thaʿlabī’s *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā* is the lack of any systematic treatment of citations from the Qurʾān. Also significant is the fact that chapters do not appear to be constructed on the basis of a consistent number of citations and that no individual chapter titles contain citations. Al-Thaʿlabī does not, therefore, adhere to any specific system for connecting citations from the Qurʾān with non-Qurʾānic material, but manages nonetheless to create a work that is able to alternate and combine narrative with verses from the holy text and exegesis (McAuliffe 1998: 358).

The other works belonging to the genre of the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā* follow the same pattern. In the particularly ancient work written by Ishāq b. Bishr (d. ca. 206/821; on him see Tottoli 2002: 141–4), verses from the Qurʾān are placed after the initial eulogy to justify a collection of stories about the prophets. Again, the same arguments are used to explain why God revealed to Muḥammad the lives of the prophets and of past peoples, the favor granted him and his people, and so forth. Ishāq b. Bishr’s work is divided into chapters (*bāb*), which begin in some instances with lists of names of the “sages” (*isnād*) and not with citations from the Qurʾān. In other cases, chapters begin with passages from the Qurʾān followed by exegetical discussions. By the time Ibn Bishr was writing, therefore, non-Qurʾānic narrative material already constituted the main body of the literary work. The Qurʾān is inserted when needed in narrative outlines based primarily

on non-Qur'ānic material, or is discussed where particularly problematic passages require additional interpretation. These characteristics are particularly evident in another collection of stories on the prophets, one often considered to be the work of story-tellers and popular tradition rather than a work of exegetical literature: the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of al-Kisā'ī (d. sixth/twelfth century; see al-Kisā'ī 1922–3; cf. Tottoli 2002: 151–5). The long initial eulogy does not include Qur'ānic citations but when the Qur'ān is referred to, it offers support and almost exegetical justification. It is common to find citations introduced by formulae, such as *fa-* (or *wa-*)*dhalika qawluhu* (“These are His words”) or *qāla Allāh ta'ālā* (“God Almighty said”) to show how the use of passages from the Qur'ān corroborates the stories. On other occasions, verses are used to dramatize certain episodes. An example is the story of Joseph and the dramatic construction of the twelfth *sūra*: literary efforts to reconstruct the dialogue between the protagonists of the story turn to the quotation of verses from the Qur'ān.

Similar is the method of another author who affirms the exegetical nature of his *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* in its first pages. Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī (d. 454/1062) justifies his work precisely by stating the close ties between his collection of stories of the prophets and the Qur'ān. The work begins with the identification and quotation of those verses from the Qur'ān that suggest the utility of the stories of the prophets and their uplifting character. The essentially exegetical nature of his work is made explicit again in the introduction, where he states that he will only include stories of prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān: the twenty-four prophets mentioned by name and the seven that are merely alluded to (Tottoli 1998: 137–8). However, his work is not all that different from the models that preceded it. Long passages are cited without referring to the sacred text, although to a lesser extent than Tha'labī's work. Quotations from the Qur'ān are inserted in the stories where possible, or they are placed at the beginning with formulae such as *wa-qawluhu* (“And God's words are”), *wa-qāla Allāh 'azza wa-jalla* (“God, may He be praised and glorified, said”), or again, at the beginning of a purely exegetical sequence, with no introduction (cf. Tottoli 2003a: paragraphs 26, 52, 90, 92, 93, 113, 129, 130, etc.).

On the whole, the relationship between the Qur'ān and the literature exemplified by these works is constant and homogeneous. It is clear from the earliest works that a greater volume of non-Qur'ānic material – compared to passages from the Qur'ān – is used to retrace pre-Islamic history, even though the Qur'ān dedicates so much space to the subject. In the literature we find traditions where no recourse is made to the Qur'ān, passages where reference to the Qur'ān is placed merely at the start or at the end, and passages where quotations are inserted in longer stories and constitute the main bulk of the text. Among these, the most numerous are narratives of the first kind, where the Qur'ān is not mentioned and where in any case the stories told do not feature in the Qur'ān. That said, these narratives are still under the indirect influence of the Qur'ān, effectively filling in the gaps of a pre-defined structure set by the Qur'ān. Obviously, the authors of works, when dealing with major Qur'ānic figures such as Abraham, Moses, Joseph, or Jesus, award these tens of pages or even more. And no doubt, the structure of these biographies is based on the salient features of their lives as described by the Qur'ān, into which traditions that are non-Qur'ānic to varying degrees are inserted.

The quantity of these non-Qur'ānic traditions is determined by the nature of the reference in the Qur'ān; it is not solely an authorial decision. In the biography of Jesus, for example, the few brief verses in the Qur'ān on his miracles justify and legitimize pages upon pages of traditions on many of his other prodigious acts. Given the small number of verses in the Qur'ān on the subject (apart from the miracle of the descent of the table from Q 5:112), the narrative sequence rarely uses the Qur'ān, and if it does, only to provide initial support or as a final seal. In dealing with Mary's pregnancy and the birth of Jesus (Q 19:16–23), numerous Qur'ānic verses are quoted with exegetical insertions and alongside other traditions that are then modeled on the sacred text. The third case that was mentioned above, where passages from the Qur'ān have been inserted into traditions, brings together an explicitly exegetical intention with a narrative construction that is directly influenced by the contents of the Qur'ān. In this case, it is often the dramatic construction of the Qur'ān that makes its use possible, through the insertion of passages into narrative structures that reproduce this dramatic structure. This is a clear sign of continuity between the word of the Qur'ān and subsequent traditions, where we find the same preference for factual narrations in which the use of dialogue between the protagonists is particularly favored.

Present: The Life of Muḥammad

The Qur'ān contains very few explicit references to the life of Muḥammad, but has numerous allusions that are not placed in a concrete context (cf. Rubin 2003a: 455). References to his contemporaries and allusions to the vicissitudes of his life are, in fact, nearly always only intelligible in exegetical literature. The constant appeals to his mission and its nature, or to the vicissitudes of the first period of his career when only a few Meccans followed his preaching, are there without being tied to a precise historical reality; they take the form of evocations of episodes that are to be understood as universally valid, rather than as testifying to specific historical facts. The life of the prophet is, therefore, not revealed through the precise identification of his life in historical moments, but rather through a message of moral intent.

Passages with a precise reference are an exception. Mention of the fact that Muḥammad was an orphan, for example, can be found in Q 93:6: "Did he not find you an orphan, and shelter you?" The punishment of eternal fire given to his adversary Abū Lahab (Q 111:1–5) and to his wife is referred to briefly, with reference made merely to his name, his wealth, and the destiny that awaits him. The same goes for the numerous verses that are hurled against opponents, unbelievers, and idolaters: it would be hard not to notice in these the evidence of the obstacles to Muḥammad's preaching, but how to go about connecting them to precise episodes in the absence of any precise reference? When the Qur'ān says that Muḥammad must not be identified with a soothsayer (*kāhin*, Q 52:29; 69:42) or when it rejects the accusation that his revelation was dictated to him (Q 16:103; 25:4f.; 44:14), or again when in other passages it tells of the accusations launched against him, it does not provide any precise historical indications. Only subsequent exegetical literature is able, in some cases, to link these generic references to concrete episodes in his life (see Rubin 2003a: 455–7).

The life of the prophet is, however, the present of the prophetic revelation. The desire and then the necessity to attain a deeper knowledge of it run through the first generations of the Islamic community. The Qurʾān, appearing to allude to certain episodes, implied at least an ephemeral scriptural bond, but also the necessity to search for material to describe the life of Muḥammad outside of the sacred text. Therefore, in post-Qurʾānic literature on the life of the prophet, we find a predominant amount of non-Qurʾānic traditions that only rarely include quotations from the Qurʾān.

The relation between traditions on the life of the prophet and the Qurʾān has been subject to various interpretations. For example, it has been argued that certain supposed Qurʾānic references to the life of Muḥammad have been inserted in his biographies after the narratives themselves had evolved and that they are not to be found in the earliest attested traditions. There is debate about the question of whether this insertion of Qurʾānic passages into more developed traditions took place within the exegetical tradition or whether the biographical tradition on the prophet was defined first, and the Qurʾānic data were attached later on (Rubin 1995: 14, 224, 226; Raven 1998: 426–7). The insertion of the Qurʾān would have thus been to adorn or support. These considerations are of little relevance from a literary point of view. Regardless, the Qurʾān never discusses the life of Muḥammad in a narratively functional way and, consequently, the traditions on the life of the prophet needed to “construct” a historical biography of the prophet without reliance on the Qurʾān from the point of view of literary form. The authors of this genre did not therefore find Qurʾānic passages that could condition their work except in the most allusive terms.

An example taken from the most famous work on the life of Muḥammad, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya* (“Life of the Prophet”) edited by Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) from the work originally written by Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), will be enough to illustrate the point. As mentioned earlier, one of the few names mentioned in the Qurʾān is that of Abū Lahab, enemy of the prophet, to whom the whole of *sūra* 111 is dedicated. The citation of the passage from the Qurʾān takes place at the beginning of a chapter dedicated to the persecutions and mistreatment suffered by Muḥammad during his stay in Mecca:

His uncle [i.e., Abū Ṭālib] and the rest of B. [Banū] Hāshim gathered around him and protected him from the attacks of the Quraysh, who, when they saw that they could not get at him, mocked and laughed at him and disputed with him. The Qurʾān began to come down concerning the wickedness of Quraysh and those who showed enmity to him, some by name and some only referred to in general. Of those named are his uncle Abū Lahab and his wife Umm Jamīl, “the bearer of the wood.” God called her this because she, so I am told, carried thorns and cast them in the apostle’s way where he would be passing. So God sent down concerning the pair of them: “Abū Lahab and his hands, God Blast,/His wealth and gains useless at the last,/He shall roast in flames, held fast./With his wife, the bearer of the wood, aghast,/on her neck a rope of palm-fibre cast [Q 111: 1–5].” I was told that Umm Jamīl, the bearer of the wood, when she heard what had come down about her and about her husband in the Qurʾān, came to the apostle of God, when he was sitting in the mosque by the Ka’ba with Abū Bakr, with a stone pestle in her hand, and when she stood by the pair of them God made her unable to see the apostle so that she saw only Abū Bakr and asked

him where his companion was “for I have been told that he is satirising me, and by God, if I had found him I would have smashed his mouth with this stone. By God I am a poet.” (Guillaume 1955: 161)

The narrative outline of the event described in this passage is entirely absent in the Qurʾān. The passage is evoked with the standard formula that establishes that God has revealed something about what is being narrated. The story is completely independent of the Qurʾānic verse, even though this determined the need for it. Furthermore, given that the passage quoted above is probably the one in which a Qurʾānic citation is provided with the greatest weight within the entire book, and that quotations of Qurʾānic verses are only found very seldom, then it is clear that the literature on the life of Muḥammad takes shape entirely independently of any structure or reference that can be ascribed to the Qurʾān. That at the origin there may be a few relevant or pertinent passages does not matter. Nor does it matter that there are stories inspired directly by Qurʾānic passages but where these passages are not quoted (Raven 1998: 432): the Qurʾān may be at the origin of such narratives, but it does not influence the literary form of the tradition. Compared to the stories of the prophets, the relationship between this narrative material and the Qurʾān is one of complete independence, and these stories are superimposed on the Qurʾānic script.

This is all the more evident in the specific genre that brings together passages from the Qurʾān with the traditions on Muḥammad, the so-called literature on the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (“occasions of revelation”) in which an attempt is made to date the revelation of specific passages in the Qurʾān by connecting them to episodes in the life of Muḥammad. The material used for works of this kind and for the biographies of the prophet (*sīra*) is often shared and overlapping (Schöller 1998: 132). The principal works of this genre were written quite late and therefore cannot be of use for the analysis of the earliest periods of the literary traditions tied to the revelation of the Qurʾān. Their specifically exegetical rather than historic character is evident already in their structure, as the traditions follow the sequence of the *sūras* of the Qurʾān which provide the title of each chapter. The verses from the Qurʾān are introduced with the (*wa-*)*qawluhu taʾālā* formula (“And the words of the Almighty”; see al-Wāḥidī 1968), followed by material to place the relevant verse in an episode of the life of Muḥammad. Occasionally, the verse is repeated and introduced by a reminder of the revelation such as *fa-nazala fī* (“And on this subject it was revealed”) or *fa-lammā anzala (Allāh) ʾalā rasul Allāh* (“And when God revealed to God’s messenger”; al-Wāḥidī 1968: 48f.). The passage from the Qurʾān is secondary and never included in the story. For example:

His words “Say: O God, Master of the kingdom!” (Q 3:26) and the rest of the verse. Ibn ʿAbbās and Anas b. Mālik said that when God’s messenger, God bless Him and grant Him salvation, had conquered Mecca and promised His people the kingdom of Persia and of Byzantium, the hypocrites and the Jews said: “How absurd! How will he obtain the kingdom of Persia and Byzantium? They are undoubtedly stronger and more powerful. Has not Muḥammad enough with Mecca and Medina to wish for the kingdom of Persia and Byzantium?” It was thus that God revealed this verse. (al-Wāḥidī 1968: 55)

The amusing quality in this exchange between the hypocrites and the Jews is the result of significant literary elaboration. The dramatization of the discussion bears the mark of the common preference in Islamic tradition for realistic reconstruction. The Qur'ānic verse is, however, completely unrelated to the story and accessory to it. This is the case for all the traditions that appear in the literature that belongs to this genre. And this is all the more clearly expressed in the other major work of this genre (al-Suyūfī 1954), which gathers its materials from previous works, of which it accurately and unequivocally reflects the style (cf. Rippin 1985a: 249; Radtke 2003: 39–58). What interests us here is that these are stories where the Qur'ānic reference is ephemeral and indirect, with little or no narrative function.⁴

The use of the Qur'ān in the biography of Muḥammad has been exhaustively described by Wansbrough (1978). He has shown how narratives relating to events in the biography of the prophet mentioned in the *Sīra* are accompanied by relevant Qur'ānic references connected to them by a keyword or phrase. Wansbrough (1978: 9) explicitly defines this “historicization derived from a keyword” by suggesting two narrative techniques: “history is itself generated by scriptural imagery or enhanced by scriptural reference. I have proposed designating the first style ‘dynamic’ and the second ‘*ex post facto*’ or ornamental. The former exhibits a process of historicization, the latter one of exemplification” (Wansbrough 1978: 7). The nature of the two narrative techniques, as also maintained in his *Quranic Studies* (1977), is defined as “exegetical, in which extracts (serial or isolated) from scripture provided the framework for extended *narratio*; and parabolic, in which the *narratio* was itself the framework for frequent if not continuous allusion to scripture” (Wansbrough 1978: 2). The literary product is, however, just one, within which the same features are evident, e.g., the secondary role of the Qur'ān in the literature on the life of Muḥammad. That verses from the Qur'ān are themselves at the origin of certain passages, or that the few Qur'ānic quotations are subsequent interpolations into texts that were previously free of such quotations, makes little difference from a literary point of view. The Qur'ān has not left any mark in the literary structure of Muḥammad's biography, nor does its word in any way influence or determine the content or tone of the biographical traditions.

Future: Heaven or Hell

In quantitative terms, using the number of verses and not their size as our measure, the space dedicated to eschatology in the Qur'ān is even greater than that awarded to the prophets. The constant reference to the destiny of man and humanity, of which certain revelations announce the end, punishment or imminent beatitude, filters through the text as a whole, and particularly the more ancient revelations. In hell, an unbearable heat will overcome the damned, who will be forced to eat from *al-zaqqūm* tree and drink scalding water and pus. Boiling water will be poured over their heads and other tortures will be inflicted under the watchful eye of the angels, whereas in heaven the blessed can enjoy all kinds of wonders, from luxurious gardens and precious clothes, and can rest in the shade and have what they wish for, food and wine will be served, they can take

pleasure in the Houris (virgins) and enjoy the vision of God. The future of the community and of humanity coincides completely with the eschatological future. There is, however, a substantial difference compared to the Qur'ānic narratives on the prophets that preceded Muḥammad's advent. Even when eschatological passages go beyond the simple mention of a particular, they essentially remain simple descriptions of what awaits man in the near future. In other words, they contain descriptions of humanity's eternal resting places, and these descriptions are used as a warning to induce the correct behavior in believers and other men. The description of what will occur on the day of judgment is not, therefore, the result of a sustained presentation that is part of a linear progression in the narrative. When the Qur'ān mentions stories of Moses, Joseph, and other prophets, even though no precise temporal reference is given, the description of their exploits implicitly communicates a necessary temporal sequence. In eschatology this does not occur, for the reason that eschatological time is a "non-time" *par excellence* – a time that cannot be defined in a linear fashion, that represents a point of arrival chosen by the Qur'ān with no detailed reference to what will happen along the path that will take humanity in that direction, although the Qur'ān does include verses linking this life to the afterlife and thus connects that future to the historical past and the present (Rustomji 2009: 42–50).

These features determine the relationship between Islamic traditions and Qur'ānic data. If, on the one hand, with regard to certain elements of eschatology, the Qur'ān is consistent and cannot be ignored, on the other hand, the possibility of a narrative sequence that describes the individual eschatological fate after death and then the route towards the end of time and eternal life cannot have the Qur'ān as its model. An example of the legacy of the Qur'ān on eschatological themes in later literature is provided by an ancient work on the description of paradise, by the Andalusian writer 'Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb (d. 238/853). The quotations from the Qur'ān in the traditions are numerous and manifest different typologies. There are plenty of verses inserted at the beginning and end, signifying that the Qur'ān corroborates the story; as well, the typical exegetical definitions are also present, but there are also numerous traditions that provide the narrative outline where the Qur'ānic wording has a functional role in the narration (Monferrer Sala 1997: 29–30). For example, in a tradition that opens the chapter on the various levels of paradise, we find:

With regard to the words of the Almighty, "And surely what the world to come has is greater in rank, greater in preferment" (Q 17:21) and with regard also to the words of the Almighty "Those in truth are the believers; they have degrees with their Lord, and forgiveness, and generous provision" (Q 8:4), 'Abd al-Malik said that the "degrees" are the ranks and merits. The degree of paradise signifies the merit and the rank reflecting how God considers some people superior to others in reference to their acts in this world obeying Him. Does not the Almighty say "Behold, how We prefer some of them over others!" (Q 17:21), that is, in the sustenance in this world: "and surely the world to come is greater in degrees" (Q 17:21), in the merits and the ranks? Then He explained this and stated "greater in preferment" (Q 17:21) and the degrees and the ranks according to which God considers some superior to others number one hundred. The people of each degree, rank and merit become companions; this does not mean that they are companions in eating, drinking and living but

only that the same merit puts them together. Have you not considered the words of the Almighty, “Whosoever obeys God and the apostle, they are with those whom God has blessed, prophets, just men, martyrs, the righteous; they are good companions!” (Q 4:69)? They are companions because they are gathered in that degree, in that merit and in that rank. (‘Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb 1987: 17; cf. Monferrer Sala 1997: 63–4)

The structure of the discussion takes place around the content of the verses from the Qur’ān. The complex definition of the different ranks of the blessed in paradise is possible owing to the rich number of passages on the subject in the sacred text. This allows for the construction of a story with a coherent narrative and one that is ultimately exegetical. The “active” insertion of references from the Qur’ān is all the more evident in dealing with the benefits that the blessed enjoy in paradise, or of the tortures endured in hell, topics for which the Qur’ān is lavish with details. The Qur’ān tells us, for example, of the seven doors of hell, it describes various punishments known by the damned in a dozen or so different passages, and generically categorizes the damned, in the fragmented and evocative style that lends itself so well to further exegetical study. As far as eschatology is concerned, therefore, the exegetical path is determined by such a great number of references in the Qur’ān to be able to form a rough outline within which to insert further narratives.

The particular character of Qur’ānic data on eschatology is evident, for example, in those works that also deal with a subject about which the sacred text is on the whole silent: man’s destiny after death and all that which precedes the day of judgment and the entry into paradise or hell. The narrative on the destiny of the individual, or the fate of the soul after death, the torments in the grave, the visitation of the angels and so forth are reconstructed almost exclusively through mention and apposition of the *ḥadīth* reports (sayings of Muḥammad) and of *āthār* (sayings attributed to the companions, successors or authorities of early Islam), a literary genre in which quotations from the Qur’ān have an accessory and confirming function, and are therefore not very frequent. If we consider the traditional medieval works that examine eschatology in depth, we necessarily find a different use and influence of the Qur’ān. The polygraph al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505) shows how the traditions inserted into his works on eschatology exhibit a different role for the Qur’ān on the basis of the topic dealt with. In long chapters on the fate of the deceased the quotations are sporadic, due also to the particular features of the traditional literature used, but the situation is very different when the discussion is dictated by numerous passages from the Qur’ān, as for example in the chapter on the wives that a believer will find in paradise (al-Suyūfī 1990: 436–44). This can also be seen in similar works, from the work of al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066; 1986) to the more famous and lengthier *Tadhkira* of al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273; 1992: e.g., 200f., 448f.), or in those whose content is marked by more popular traditions, such as *al-Durra al-fākhira* attributed to al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111; Gautier 1878) or the *Daqā’iq* of ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qāḍī (fl. eighth/fourteenth century; al-Qāḍī 1984: 42f.).

Traditional literature necessarily absorbs the non-temporality of the sacred text. The exegete or historian must transmit the description of eschatology given in the Qur’ān, or in the sayings of the prophet, in a framework that nearly always lacks any temporal linearity.

This explains how the rich traditional material is abundant but blocked by a descriptive rigidity. Such features are all the more clear when one considers the absence of any details that can be traced to the apocalyptic genre, often connected to eschatological events, and that generally provides these with a narrative outline and a historical perspective. The Qurʾān does not contain apocalyptic material, although there are certain themes of this kind connected to verses on eschatology. For example, the Qurʾān mentions Gog and Magog and the *dābba* (“beast”), but it is well known that apocalyptic literature does not make great use of the Qurʾān, and when it does, references in the text are made in the usual way that denotes its unrelatedness: at the beginning or at the end of the traditions (Cook 2002: 275f.).

What has been discussed thus far denotes a different typology of use of Qurʾānic verses in post-Qurʾānic Islamic literature. The particular features of the topic (eschatology, future) and how it is treated in the numerous passages found in the Qurʾān, denote a total absence of a temporal sequence capable of providing a fixed structure for narrative. Eschatological time is a non-time and any literature that seeks to explain it must rely on traditions that deal with the fate of the individual after death that are based almost entirely on later traditions and not on the Qurʾān. When we are dealing with issues for which there is an abundance of data in the Qurʾān, the picture is altogether different. These traditions and the authors that gather them endeavor to insert the references in a harmonious way into the narrative outline. This occurs outside of a clear and well-developed narrative framework precisely because the frequent quotations from the Qurʾān determine the subject matter and how it should be dealt with, and restrict successive literature to an exegetical discourse that must relate the numerous descriptions found in the Qurʾān.

Conclusion

The narrative references found in the Qurʾān correspond to the three historical periods described above, which look to the past, the present, and the future of the community of believers. The Qurʾān, however, deals differently with each. The past is awarded a great deal of space and an implicitly historical narrative framework, while only rare allusions are made to the present and the future features in a substantial part of its verses but only for descriptions not included in sustained narratives. The subsequent tradition models itself on these features and it is here that the legacy of the Qurʾān makes its sharpest contribution. In the case of literature on the past, on the prophets, the Qurʾān affects the definition of themes and the fundamental roles, offering a narrative outline and often references to specific events. We find here all the characteristic typologies in the relation between sacred text and non-canonical tradition. With regard to the life of Muḥammad, the narrative framework is not determined by the Qurʾān, nor does the Qurʾān offer anything more than the odd sporadic reference. When it does feature, the Qurʾān is clearly unrelated to the content of the later non-Qurʾānic tradition, and when a connection is made, it appears to be the fruit of an exegetical path. With regard to eschatology, we find a third scenario. The Qurʾān provides neither narrative framework,

nor a defined historical backdrop, but it does contain many verses on this subject. Subsequent literature goes on to create a sequence that goes from individual eschatology to the description of celestial dwellings, not inferred from the Qurʾān, within which to insert the necessary references to the holy text. Here we find all kinds of traditions with a prevalence of traditions connected to the Qurʾān or that pick up from it and define its contents.

The definition of a historical and narrative path based on these three moments has, therefore, its origin in the contents of the Qurʾān, but achieves completion only in subsequent literature. The best example of this is offered by Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), whose follow-up to his universal historiography *al-Bidāya waʾl-nihāya* (“The Beginning and the End”) was a collection of eschatological traditions entitled *Nihāyat al-bidāya* (“The End of the Beginning”). Past, Islamic present, and future are all included in a solid conception of history, fruit of a theology based on the Qurʾānic revelation and that is by all accounts a salvation history (Calder 1993; cf. Wansbrough 1978; Gilliot 1993, 1994). This unified vision of history conceived by Ibn Kathīr emphasizes another point. The religious literature that brings together the three topics/literary genres just discussed, in so much as it is essentially historical, manifests a unity that is achieved in historiographical literature.

Such a phenomenon, as mentioned elsewhere (Tottoli 2003b), derives in part from the particular conception of history inspired by the Qurʾān, but to no lesser extent also from the form of Islamic narratives. The fragmentation and reciprocal independence of the traditions that constitute the smallest narrative units (*akhbār*) make each of these traditions a piece of an ever-expanding and more complex mosaic. In successive literature, the author’s presence is less marked, and an external viewpoint is privileged that aims to respect the legacy of previous generations and emphasize verisimilitude (cf. Leder 1992: 307; Radtke 2003: 143–6). In this way, medieval works are long collections of smaller units that are chosen by authors whose intervention is minimal. Even here, though, it is possible to see a generic Qurʾānic influence. The taste for factual narrations typical of the Qurʾān leaves its mark in subsequent literature that uses this technique in the formal presentation of the criteria of transmission – with the quotation of *isnād* – and even in the style. The dramatic style which is also typical of the Qurʾān is brought out in subsequent traditions that privilege the use of direct speech by the protagonists, with no additional commentary. Here, exactly as in the definition of the historical themes, we can find one of the most significant and consistent legacies of Qurʾānic narratives in Islamic literature.

Notes

- 1 The question of the historical character of the Qurʾān is, from our perspective, of little relevance. The Qurʾān does not have a defined conception of history, and its intent is moral rather than historical. However, the Qurʾān frequently makes use of narratives that have historical significance, in the terms described above. On this issue see Donner (1998: 80 and n. 64), who states that “the very concept of history is fundamentally irrelevant to the Qurʾān’s

- concern” and mentions “Qur’ān’s ahistorical point of view.” For further information, and for arguments against this position (by Rosenthal, Obermann, and Khalidi), see the material quoted by Donner.
- 2 The exegetical aspect of this issue is not relevant here. On this matter, and on the narrative features of Qur’ānic exegesis, see Calder (1993); Afsaruddin (2001); Riddell (1997); McAuliffe (1998: 353f.).
 - 3 Chapters on prophets that begin with a quotation from the Qur’ān: Hūd (Brinner 2002: 105), Ṣāliḥ (Brinner 2002: 114), Yūsuf (Brinner 2002: 181, but cf. the original Arabic: al-Tha’labī 1954: 181), Iram (Brinner 2002: 238), Aṣḥāb al-rass (Brinner 2002: 247), Job (Brinner 2002: 254), Shu’ayb (Brinner 2002: 274), Moses (Brinner 2002: 278), in which also many paragraphs of his long biography begin with a quotation from the Qur’ān, and so also Korah (Brinner 2002: 351), al-Khiḍr (Brinner 2002: 361), Elijah (Brinner 2002: 419), Dhū ’l-Kifl (Brinner 2002: 436), Eli and Samuel (Brinner 2002: 439), Saul (Brinner 2002: 445), David (Brinner 2002: 462), David and Solomon (Brinner 2002: 482, 485), Isaiah etc. (Brinner 2002: 549), Ezra (Brinner 2002: 576), Luqmān (Brinner 2002: 586), Dhū ’l-Qarnayn (Brinner 2002: 603), Aṣḥāb al-kahf (Brinner 2002: 689), Samson (Brinner 2002: 726), Aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd (Brinner 2002: 728), Aṣḥāb al-fil (Brinner 2002: 733).
 - 4 There are of course different typologies. Certain traditions of *asbāb* have a legal role (Wansbrough 1977: 38), while others have mainly a “haggadically exegetical” function (Rippin 1985a: 256–7; Rippin 1988: 3, 19). Some collections of *asbāb al-nuzūl* also contain narratives on the prophets, even though they are introduced with a different terminology: *qiṣṣa* (“tale”) rather than *sabab* (“occasion”) (Rippin 1985b: 5–6). In this sense, the material has the function of narratively expanding a verse (Rippin 1988: 4). The issue of dating is subject to a number of interpretations (cf. Kister 1983: 352–3; Schöller 1998: 114–33).

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CHAPTER 38

Recitation

Anna M. Gade

A unique characteristic of the recited Qurʾān is its tendency to reference itself, to discuss the effects of its recitation even as it is being read. The word Qurʾān itself is often said to be a variant of the verb *q-r-*, which means “to read” or “to recite aloud.” According to Muslims, the Qurʾān’s most authoritative transmission has been oral since the time of its revelation to Muḥammad. Many of the Qurʾān’s names for itself also highlight the active aspects of the rendering of the Qurʾān in voice, such as its being a repeated “reminder,” *dhikr*. Technical sciences for “reading” the Qurʾān have been developed in the Islamic traditions of learning and practice where they have a central place. The recitation of the Qurʾān is a central act of Islamic piety both in required practice (canonical prayer, *ṣalāt*) and in other supererogatory and voluntary religious expression. Today, the recited Qurʾān is the basis of Islamic revitalization in parts of the contemporary Muslim world, indicating its foundational role in collective Muslim life worldwide.

The Qurʾān and the *Sunna* on the Recited Qurʾān

Throughout the development of traditions of Qurʾān recitation and up until the present, Muslims have based the theory and practice of the recited Qurʾān on the two most authoritative sources in Islamic tradition: the Qurʾān itself and, second, material in *ḥadīth* reports. The latter comprise the *sunna* or exemplary model of comportment of Muḥammad. The ethico-legal injunctions to recite the Qurʾān and the norms for how to recite it are expanded in other authoritative material such as information on how influential early Muslims recited and other normative guidelines for the technique and

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practice of recitation. Within this material, however, it is the Qurʾān and the *sunna* that carry the most authoritative force because of their status in tradition.

As a highly self-referential text, the Qurʾān includes many descriptions of its own recitation and the power of hearing and voicing the text. The Qurʾān discusses its own recitation in general terms, and only somewhat less so in specific or technical terms. Because of the Qurʾān's unique authority in Islamic systems to guide Islamic thought and action, these descriptions of the recited Qurʾān function also as a kind of instruction to believers. The verses of the Qurʾān that have been said to be among the first revealed to Muḥammad, the beginning verses of *sūra* 96, *al-ʿAlaq*, are often interpreted as a command, specifically directed to the prophet while also directed to Muslims in general, to voice the Qurʾān, "Recite! In the name of your Lord who created humanity from a clot." The Qurʾān also gives guidelines about how to perform its own recitation, as in Q 73:4, "Recite the Qurʾān with *tartīl* [slowly, deliberately]." Muslims often cite Q 75:16 as instruction on Qurʾān recitation: "Do not hasten your tongue with it; it is for Us [God] to collect and to read it; when We recite it, follow then its recitation." The Qurʾān includes many recommendations about its own recitation, such as to concentrate fully, to recite as an act of supererogatory piety especially at night, and to "remember" and to "preserve" its message.

Many of the Qurʾānic directives concerning recitation found in the Qurʾān are descriptions of the effect of the recited Qurʾān on its listeners. The Qurʾān often expresses the embodied, emotive responses of believers to its own recitation. For example, the Qurʾān describes these reactions as "shivering" skin and "trembling" heart (for example Q 19:58 and 39:23). Weeping as a recognition of the message of the recited Qurʾān is a common Qurʾānic theme, as in Q 5:83, "And when they hear what has been sent down to the messenger [of the Qurʾān], you see their eyes overflow with tears because of what they have recognized of truth. They shout: 'Our Lord! We believe; so You will write us down among the witnesses to the Truth.'" The Qurʾān often links such descriptions of affective response to the altered moral state of the believer who is receptive to the message. An example is Q 17:107–9, "When it [the Qurʾān] is recited to them, they fall down upon their faces, prostrating, and say: 'Glory be to our Lord. Our Lord's promise is fulfilled.' And they fall down upon their faces, weeping, and it increases them in humility."

Ḥadīth material enhances Qurʾānic prescription and description by conveying the ideal intensity of Qurʾānic engagement through the injunction to follow the model of Muḥammad. This is because the *sunna*, in the form of the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals and disapprovals of the prophet, is preserved in *ḥadīth* "traditions." *Ḥadīth* material contains many separate accounts that relate what kind of recitation Muḥammad favored, how he reacted to hearing the recited Qurʾān, as well as some information on how the prophet himself recited the Qurʾān. For example, there are many reports of statements made by Muḥammad that he valued beautiful voices in Qurʾān reading in the collection of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and others, such as the following, "God has not heard anything more pleasing than listening to a prophet reciting the Qurʾān in a sweet, loud voice" (al-Bukhārī n.d.: VI, Book 61, no. 541). *Ḥadīth* literature also includes many descriptions of the prophet weeping and shedding tears when he heard recitation that was especially affecting.

In addition, *ḥadīth* accounts preserve information about how Muḥammad himself recited the Qurʾān. These traditions include detailed information about particular *sūras* that he recited, and even at what time of day he would read them. This material is a basis for later pious traditions of recitation which build on this information. In general, *ḥadīth* reports and other authoritative material from the earliest period highlight the occasions and merits of recitation instead of practical technique. Actual practice is covered in another kind of literature, treating the technical aspects of recitation determined by the “science of readings” which developed out of Qurʾān and *sunna*, and which further derives authority from practices understood to have been transmitted in an unbroken way since the earliest centuries of Islam times.

Systems for Reading the Qurʾān: *Qirāʾāt* and *Tajwīd*

The recitation of the Qurʾān (*tilāwat al-Qurʾān*) is part of the fundamental branches of Qurʾānic study and learning. As such, it is a field within the overall sciences of the “readings” (*qirāʾāt*) of the Qurʾān. The term *tilāwa* appears often in the Qurʾān in both the forms of a noun and a verb. In the Qurʾān it refers, for example, to the signs of God that are “rehearsed” in the Qurʾān, the accounts of previous messengers and communities in sacred history, as well as the actual practice of rendering the Qurʾān in voice. Usually, when the word refers to the reading of the Qurʾān, *tilāwa* conveys a sense of “following” the Qurʾānic message in voice. The practice of reading the Qurʾān follows a set of guidelines known as *tajwīd*. *Tajwīd*, although not a Qurʾānic term, is the basic system for the correct pronunciation and rendition of the speech of the Qurʾān; these guidelines are understood to have been revealed to the prophet by the angel Gabriel along with the Qurʾān itself. Recitation of the Qurʾān according to the rules of *tajwīd* has many names across the Muslim-majority world. Some of these are forms of the Qurʾānic expression *tartīl*, which conveys a sense of “measuring out” the recited Qurʾān in a careful way.

Early readers and transmitters of the Qurʾān were known for their knowledge as well as their piety. There are reports that Muḥammad personally dispatched readers throughout the growing Muslim-controlled territories in order to teach the Qurʾān to others. This class of “readers” of the Qurʾān had an important place in early Islamic history. It was their loss during war in the first generations that is said to have precipitated the standardization of the Qurʾānic text. Later, concern over non-standard readings in non-Arab lands led to the formalization of sciences of reading the Qurʾān based on the accepted text. The related Qurʾānic sciences of Arabic grammar, Qurʾānic exegesis, and recitation (including variant readings [*qirāʾāt*] or vocalizations of the standard text) developed all at the same time, as a simultaneous response to prevailing conditions. Like the standardization of the ʿUthmānic text, the technical guidelines for readings of the Qurʾān were systematized to guide the potential diversity of Muslim practices of recitation.

In its more technical and restricted usage, the term *qirāʾāt* usually denotes the idea of the variant accepted readings of the Qurʾān. These differing readings do not relate to

pitch variation nor any substantive textual variants. Instead, all of the readings pertain to minor differences in the vocalization of the same ʿUthmānic text; they all employ the same rules of sound production (*tajwīd*). There are usually said to be seven accepted readings in the system of *qirāʾāt*. This number has been disputed at times in the past. The number seven is based on a well-known *ḥadīth* transmitted in several versions. One states that Muḥammad said, “This Qurʾān has been revealed to be recited in seven different modes [*aḥruf*], so recite of it whichever is easiest for you” (al-Bukhārī n.d.: VI, Book 61, no. 561). Some variants of this report give an “occasion of revelation” or context for the verse, which was a question about the proper reading of Q 25; another *ḥadīth* report states that Muḥammad said that the angel Gabriel would recite in different ways for him. The idea of the “seven modes” has been open to a variety of interpretations in Islamic tradition, including the possibility that the *aḥruf* may refer to differing dialects among the Arabs at the time of the revelation of the Qurʾān. The standard interpretation, however, is that the *aḥruf* refer to what became known as the “seven readings” (*qirāʾāt*) of the Qurʾān. The reasons given for the diversity of these accepted readings include the idea that they afford an easier reception of the Qurʾān for learners, as well as the suggestion that they may enhance the multifaceted semantic layers of Qurʾānic meanings.

The establishment of the accepted range of variation in “readings” is credited to Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad (d. 324/936). The seven readings that were standardized in the time of Ibn Muḥammad as the accepted *qirāʾāt* represented prominent traditions of reading in five centers of Muslim learning in that period: Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Basra, and Kufa. A list corresponding to this selection includes the following seven readers: Ibn Kathīr (Mecca, d. 120/737), Nāfiʿ (Medina, d. 169/785), Ibn ʿamir (Damascus, d. 118/736), Abū ʿAmr (Basra, d. 154/770), ʿāsim (Kufa, d. 128/745), Ḥamza (Kufa, d. 156/772), and al-Kisāʿī (Kufa, d. 189/804). A rationale behind this authoritative selection was to take independent lines of authoritative transmission going back to Muḥammad, and thereby minimize the possibility of error. There was, however, some controversy over the selection at the time. In addition, the “science of readings” continued to develop after this time as well; the later, influential scholar, Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), describes ten variant readings, while other scholars have cited fourteen. Nevertheless, Ibn Muḥammad’s system of seven *qirāʾāt* has been accepted as the standard. Today, the most popular readings are those transmitted from ʿāsim by Ḥafṣ (d. 180/796), along with Nāfiʿ transmitted by Warsh (d. 197/812).

In general, when recitation of the Qurʾān is begun in one of the seven readings, the reciter must continue with that reading consistently until he or she has finished the entire selection. In other words, it is not permissible to mix up the readings within a single performance. The differences in readings are, in general, minor differences in vocalizing particular words as well as stylistic variation. An example of accepted variation among the readings is found in the first *sūra* of the Qurʾān. The first word in the third verse may be rendered either as *māliki* or *maliki*. Both versions convey the same sense of meaning, which is God’s dominion over the day of judgment. In another example, one that has led to differences of opinion on ritual law for ablution, Q 5:6 may carry two meanings about how to purify the area of the feet, depending on vocalization; it

may be understood as “wash” (according to Nāfi‘ and Ḥafṣ) or “wipe” (according to Ibn Kathīr and Abū ‘Amr). These parameters of diversity among the standard readings have been seen by some, including those in European traditions of textual analysis, as important sources of information about Qur’ānic expression and the history of its reception.

There are two key terms for the applied aspects of the recitation of the Qur’ān: *tartīl* and *tajwīd*. These are technical components of *tilāwa*, aspects of any reading (*qirā’a*). *Tartīl* and *tajwīd* are closely related terms; for example, the Qur’ān’s own instruction, “Recite the Qur’ān with *tartīl*” (Q 73:4), is often considered to mean, “Recite the Qur’ān according to the rules of *tajwīd*.” *Tajwīd* refers to a rigorous system of guidelines that determine the proper vocalization of the Qur’ān and thereby shape its characteristic rhythm and specific sound. It does not pertain to pitch variation, however, which is always improvised.

The root meaning of the word *tajwīd* carries senses of “beautifying” and “making correct.” *Tajwīd* is part of the wider “science of readings” (*qirā’āt*) within the classic “Qur’ānic sciences.” It is often defined in Muslim sources by some variant of the expression “giving each sound its correct weight and measure.” The formal system of *tajwīd* provides instruction on the correct articulation of phonetic sounds, the assimilation of vowels and consonants in juxtaposition, and the proper rhythmic duration of vowel sounds. It also includes parameters for non-melodic improvisational flexibility, since it governs, for example, pauses and starts in reading; these allow the reader to emphasize certain words, phrases, or sections. One of the reasons for the development of this Qur’ānic science alongside grammar and exegesis was the standardization of style and sound across the growing linguistic diversity of the Islamic world in the early period. The rules of *tajwīd* assure uniformity and consistency in the vocalization of God’s speech through clear guidelines.

By determining the unique sound of Qur’ān recitation in these ways, *tajwīd* distinguishes the recited Qur’ān from ordinary Arabic speech and singing. Shaping cadences and rhythms of recitation, *tajwīd* also “musicalizes” the recited Qur’ān to some degree, although the recited Qur’ān is never to be understood in terms of a human product such as “music.” It is one of the first areas of study of the Qur’ān, since children need to learn to recite the Qur’ān properly in order to fulfill one of the most basic ritual obligations, canonical prayer. For the four-fifths of the Muslim world that is not Arabic-speaking, this study also doubles as an introduction to the Arabic language. Native speakers of Arabic must study *tajwīd*, since the rules of *tajwīd* concern much more than grammatical and intelligible pronunciation. In some cases, the end of the formal study of *tajwīd* is the successful reading of the entire Qur’ān text with a teacher; known as *khatm al-Qur’ān*, this achievement is marked with a life-cycle celebration in parts of the Muslim world.

The formal system of *tajwīd* as found in these sources has two primary branches. The first of these is the correct vocalization of letters and how the sounds may blend or assimilate, and especially rules corresponding to the sounds “m” and “n.” A second important area of the science of *tajwīd* is the relative duration of vowels, which is based on where they appear. In addition, the field covers the accepted and recommended stops and starts in sectioning, along with other guidelines that may be said to relate to comportment with the Qur’ān (*adab tilāwat al-Qur’ān*). The handbooks for elementary

tajwīd used all across the Muslim world begin with instruction on the points of articulation (*makhārij*) of the letters of the Arabic alphabet.

A first principle of *tajwīd* is that consonants with the same point of articulation will assimilate, or blend together. For example, as in spoken Arabic, *al-rasūl* (“the messenger”) is pronounced as *ar-rasūl* because *rāʾ* is a blending “sun” letter. In *tajwīd*, other kinds of consonantal assimilations (and partial assimilations) which are not heard in ordinary spoken Arabic also occur. Unique to Qurʾānic pronunciation are rules for particular letters (such as *mīm* and especially *nūn*). There are special conventions for nasalized pronunciation (*ghunna*) of the letters *mīm* and *nūn* when they are doubled in a word or if their doubling happens between two words. There is also a class of rules related to changes that these letters undergo based on adjacent consonants. The second major area of beginning *tajwīd* study, pertaining to the articulation of vowels, covers the three vowel sounds in Arabic (“a,” “i,” and “u,” in long and short forms). Adjacent consonants affect not only the sound shape of these vowels (as occurs in standard spoken *fuṣṣḥa* Arabic) but, in Qurʾān recitation, also their duration. In the system of *tajwīd*, vowels are classified according to their duration or elongation, which is called *madd*. *Madd* is measured in terms of a basic unit or weight (called *madd aṣḥī* or *madd ṭabiʿī*).

Another class of rules in the system of *tajwīd* pertains to stops and starts in sectioning or phrasing (*al-waqf waʾl-ibtidāʾ*) which may only occur at the end of a complete word. At certain points in the text of the Qurʾān, a range of permissible and impermissible stops are marked, ranging according to the classification of their desirability. There are seven most general forms of stop, such as the *lāzim* stop (marked with the letter *mīm*), where a stop must be made or else meaning would be distorted. For stops, there are at least five levels of preference (such as “permissible to continue, but stopping is better” [*jāʾiz*, marked with the letter *jīm*], or “permissible to stop, but it would be better to continue” [*murakhkhas*, marked with the letter *sād*]).

Even though the term *tajwīd* does not appear in the Qurʾān, the practice of recitation according to such guidelines is understood to have been a central dimension of Islamic piety since the time of Muḥammad. According to Islamic tradition, the prophet learned the recitation of the Qurʾān and the rules for its vocalization from Gabriel when the Qurʾān was first sent down. Classical recitation manuals consolidated techniques and definitions that had certainly been long accepted. As with the other Qurʾānic sciences like exegesis (*tafsīr*), systematic writings on the sciences of *qirāʾāt* and *tajwīd* appeared in the fourth *hijrī* century and were circulated widely after that time. Most manuals and discussions after the time of Ibn al-Jazarī follow his systematization. According to such formal, established systems, the interrelated ideas of *tilāwa*, *aḥruf*, *qirāʾāt*, and *tajwīd* are all dimensions of reading that provide guidelines for the vocalization of the Qurʾān.

Norms of Qurʾānic Worship, Preservation, and Piety

The practice of reciting the Qurʾān is a foundational element of Islamic education, practice, and piety. During the fasting month of Ramaḍān, the Qurʾān is read throughout the course of the month in night-time prayers called *tarāwīḥ*. One of the standard divisions of

the Qurʾān is its partition into thirty equal, consecutive parts, or *juzʿ*; this sectioning facilitates complete recitation of the Qurʾān over the course of a month. In addition, during Ramaḍān or during the days of *ḥajj*, the whole Qurʾān may be recited through in one night by pious Muslims. Muslims read the Qurʾān frequently as an act of supererogatory piety, and recitation especially at night is performed by committed Muslims.

Reciting the Qurʾān is required as a part of one of the fundamental acts of worship in Islam, *ṣalāt* (canonical prayer). The recitation of the opening *sūra* (*al-fātiḥa*) is carried out seventeen times a day by practicing Muslims due to its liturgical use as a component of *ṣalāt*. This chapter of the Qurʾān is also read in other contexts, such as the sealing of contractual agreements and blessings. During canonical prayer, Muslims are required to read another, unspecified part of the Qurʾān besides *sūrat al-fātiḥa*. When prayer is conducted individually, this is often a *sūra* selected from among the short Meccan *sūras* that are the thirtieth *juzʿ* of the Qurʾān; if the prayer is led by a prayer leader (*imām*), this reading will be according to the leader's choice. In addition, it is common in worship and other practices of Muslim piety to hear the well-known "light verse" (Q 24:35) or the "throne verse" (Q 2:255). The final *juzʿ* of the Qurʾān, as well as other passages like these, are commonly memorized by Muslims. *Sūras* 49 and 67 are also often committed to memory. Other parts of the Qurʾān that are also well known and read on certain occasions include *sūra* 12, especially for life-cycle observances, and *sūra* 36, read for the deceased or dying in a sometimes controversial practice. *Sūra* 18 is often read communally as well.

The recitation of the Qurʾān is a prototype for the practice of *dhikr*, a Qurʾānic word for "reminder" and a practice associated with Ṣūfī piety. The Qurʾān is the basis for the formulae used for such recitational piety as well as the recitation of the ninety-nine names of God (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*). These "beautiful names" are mentioned in Q 17:110, part of which reads, "Say: Call on Allāh or call on al-Raḥmān. By whatever name you call [Him], His are the most beautiful names (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*)." Not all of the names are given in the Qurʾān, however. The Qurʾān's brief listing of some of the names is found in Q 59:22–4.

Differing styles of reading the Qurʾān in worship, public performance, and more private acts of piety are usually identified in terms of their relative rapidity, although the terms used may vary across the Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority worlds. Usually *ḥadr* is the expression for a rapid recitation, either performed from memory or for the purpose of reading of large portions of the text aloud; recitation of the Qurʾān in canonical worship tends to be fairly fast as well. *Tartīl* (or *murattal*) is at a slower pace, used for study and practice (sometimes called *tadarrus*). In many places, the term *tajwīd* has a non-technical meaning of cantillated recitation. The term *mujawwad* refers to a slow recitation that deploys heightened technical artistry and melodic modulation, as in public performances by trained experts.

The memorization of the complete Qurʾān, which is known as its "preservation" (*taḥfīz*), was encouraged ever since the earliest period of Islam. Among those known especially for memorizing and preserving the Qurʾān in the time of the prophet were his wives. There are many *ḥadīth* reports that encourage Muslims to read the Qurʾān and to know it by heart. Traditionally, formal education begins with the memorization of the

Qur'ān at an early age and then branches out from there to other subjects; this institutionalized practice continues in many Muslim-majority societies. The memorization of the Qur'ān is a life-long pursuit, however, because readers must continually repeat the text so that no part of it is forgotten. The non-linear structure of the Qur'ān demands this continual rehearsal in order to commit to memory since it is, as a *ḥadīth* on memorization transmitted from Muḥammad has it, “like a camel that is always trying to run away.” Memorizers who have made the commitment to “preserving” the Qur'ān often repeat one seventh of it each day of the week. Students who are memorizing the Qur'ān for the first time study handbooks on difficult aspects of the Qur'ān, such as verses that closely resemble one another. For Muslim men and women who do not attempt the challenge of memorizing the entire Qur'ān, and then keeping it memorized, many are able to meet the goal of having memorized the final *juz'* (thirtieth) of the Qur'ān.

According to Islamic ethical and legal traditions, memorization is a recommended act of piety; it is classified as an obligation that must always be observed by some members of a community on behalf of the group (*farḍ kifāya*). This means that Qur'ān memorizers are a special class of readers of the Qur'ān and they command a special respect within their communities since they “hold” the Qur'ān in memory. They have a responsibility to contribute to the ethical order of society. This is often expressed in the literature through representation of the reader's unending practice that continues both day and night: Qur'ān reading by night and constructive moral action by day. Memorizers are also expected to meet scrupulous standards of moral comportment, or *adab*, and to commit themselves to the highest of ethical standards.

Material on the proper behavior and comportment with the Qur'ān is known as *adab al-Qur'ān*. This literature continues the precedent of collecting reports about the recitational practice of Muḥammad, while it also includes further information about the recitational customs of other pious persons and other norms of practice. These include respectful silence when listening, sitting facing the *qibla* (the direction of prayer) if possible, meeting the standards of ritual purity, repeating verses, and reciting the standard opening and closing formulae. These latter formulae are the opening statement, the *ta'awwudh* (“I take refuge in God from the accursed Satan”), which is followed by the *basmala* (“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”), no matter where in the Qur'ān the reader begins. The reciter always closes a reading with the formula *ṣadaqa ʾllāh al-ʾaẓīm*, meaning “Thus God the All-mighty has spoken truly.” If the reciter is interrupted by a greeting (*salām*) while reading, he or she is to stop to return the greeting; he or she is also to stop when hearing the *adhān* (call to prayer). Reciters and listeners may observe *sajdat al-tilāwa*, which is the prostration that is to be performed at fourteen or fifteen verses (according to different traditions) in the Qur'ān that refer to created beings who bow before their Creator. Only in some parts of the Muslim world is there concern over men listening to the voices of women reciting the Qur'ān; in other regions, such as Indonesia, women reciters are very popular.

The *adab* of the recited Qur'ān also includes information compiled on matters such as how quickly to recite the entire Qur'ān as well as what times of day are considered to be good to complete a reading of the entire text; it also considers common challenges that reciters may face, such as confusing pauses and starts in sectioning. In addition, much

material addresses the intents of recitation, such as the problem of acquiring a worldly reward or payment for teaching or performance. In a related manner, it includes prohibitions against reciting the Qurʾān just for show, or in an ostentatious manner that draws attention to the reader instead of the reading. The latter is considered a form of hypocrisy and is condemned in accepted *ḥadīth* reports as well as other material on the *adab* of recitation. For example, one tradition reports: “Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī narrated that he heard God’s messenger saying, “There will appear some among you whose ritual prayers will make you look down on yours, and whose (good) deeds will make you look down on yours, but they will recite the Qurʾān and it will not leave their throats [i.e., they do not act upon it]” (al-Bukhārī n.d.: IX, Book 84, no. 67).

Material on the *adab* of *tilāwat al-Qurʾān* and on the *faḍāʾil* (“excellences”) of the Qurʾān, in both accepted *ḥadīth* accounts and other sources, underscores that the recitation of the Qurʾān grants rewards to individuals and to their pious communities. There is an emphasis on the idea that the recitation of the Qurʾān brings on individual and collective rewards both for persons and their communities. This is, for example, expressed in the following statement of Abū Hurayra, cited in authors such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111):

Surely the house in which the Qurʾān is recited provides easy circumstances for its people, its good increases, angels come to it [in order to listen to the Qurʾān] and satans leave it. The house in which the book of God is not recited provides difficult circumstances for its people, its good decreases, angels leave it, and satans come to it. (al-Ghazālī 1983: 24)

In addition to describing the peace and tranquility (*sakīna*) that descend when the Qurʾān is read in this world, the effects of recitation and of studying and teaching the recited Qurʾān are also described in terms of the accounting on the day of judgment and the consequences in the world to come. In an eschatological mode of piety, rewards for reciting the Qurʾān are often accounted *sūra* by *sūra* in this literature, or even letter by letter. Early traditions of ascetic and Qurʾānic piety elaborated such material within Islamic tradition, and Ṣūfīs, among the heirs to this pious tradition, developed especially the soteriological and interiorized Qurʾānic dimensions of piety. In this tradition, a close relationship to the Qurʾān is depicted as an ongoing intimacy, at times framed in terms of the key Ṣūfī concept of “friendship.” Engaging the Qurʾān in practice should also conform to the reader’s close and immediate experience of following (*tilāwa*) the Qurʾān in the “heart,” and this pious ideal is central to the tradition of the recited Qurʾān within any pious Islamic orientation.

Qurʾānic Aesthetics and Performance

Doctrine, worship, and aesthetics link closely the theory and practice of Qurʾān recitation. The closeness of this linkage of theory and practice comes in part because the recited Qurʾān is understood to be the actual voicing of the speech of God. For example, early philosophical controversies that arose in the first centuries of Islam, regarding

questions of temporality and the nature of the Qurʾān as created in time or being eternal, grew in part out of practical questions about human agency in following divine speech in voice. More generally, a range of theoretical and practical issues about the recited Qurʾān are seen to connect to, and their tensions are resolved through, the doctrine of *iʿjāz*, which is the idea of the miraculous and inimitable nature of God’s speech. This doctrine of inimitability supports the idea that the Arabic text, as divine revelation and speech, is a unique class of discourse. Many issues of worship, piety, and performance are clarified in theory and practice by connecting them to the transcendent status and experience of the recited Qurʾān.

Throughout the history of Islam, Qurʾān reciters have confronted the issue of their artistry potentially becoming confused with the transcendent power of the Qurʾān. Al-Ghazālī (1983) presents rules for recitation to resolve such an apparent tension. He does this by positing an external as well as an internal dimension to the act of voicing God’s speech. In this formulation, the intents, consciousness, and sensibilities of the reciter are seen to be secondary to the act of voicing divine speech. The reciter is thus to strive to diminish the aspects of performance that are not pure amplifications of the manifestation of an idealized presence. Well-defined and specific techniques of affect and performance may be applied in order to achieve this ideal.

The appreciation of the vocal artistry of trained reciters has been part of Muslim religious and social life since the earliest times. Much of the explicit theorization and practice related to the aesthetics of Qurʾān recitation relates to the key idea of spiritual audition. The term for this, *samāʿ*, is usually associated with Sūfī traditions, but in the case of the recited Qurʾān, multiple styles of classical piety overlap. Normative questions relating to musical practice and its application and acceptability are tied to the issue of *samāʿ*. These legal debates usually center on the intents and contexts of practice rather than the status of music as a general category. The most authoritative sources on what Kristina Nelson (1985) has termed the “*samāʿ* polemic” in Islamic traditions highlight a tension between the cultivation of experiential perceptions related to “listening” (*samāʿ*) on the one hand and the ideal of the absolute separation of transcendent revelation and human components on the other.

According to Islamic tradition, the “melodic” aspects of Qurʾān recitation may not be fixed in any one performance or in an overall system. This is in order that God’s speech, in the form of the revealed Qurʾān, will not become associated with human technical artistry. It is not known what melodic structures were used in the recitation of the Qurʾān in the earliest period. It is documented, however, that practices of Qurʾān recitation developed into something resembling the highly ornamented *mujawwad* style in the ʿAbbāsīd period, when reciters began to deploy the emerging modal system of music (*maqām*; plural *maqāmāt*). It is in this period that the question of “recitation with melody” (*qirāʾa biʾl-allhān*) appears in the literature, and the melodic structures deployed in this time were apparently those of Arab art music. Today, the highly proficient style of recitation known as *mujawwad* uses melodic structures also found in contemporary Arab art music.

A *maqām* is a musical mode; the term denotes both scalar pitch class and melody type. Diversity and flexibility characterize the modal system both diachronically and

synchronically. Early treatises formulated an analytical framework for the system that was followed for centuries, deploying musical characteristics in the identification of mode, such as initial and final pitch, as well as, in some cases, melody types. Not only are modes applied flexibly in practice, but the overall musical system is difficult to formalize or classify historically or geographically. In the early nineteenth century, a system for analyzing scale (based on quarter-tones) became widespread in the Middle East. An attempt was also made to codify all of the *maqāmāt* being used in Arab countries at the historic Cairo congress on Arab music in 1932. Such efforts, however, face the challenge of systematizing the diversity of the entire musical system, as well as the problems of notation and standardization.

Contemporary performers of the recited Qurʾān in the style called *mujawwad* have been increasingly popular in recent decades due to broadcast and recording technologies and other global trends. In *The Art of Reciting the Qurʾān*, Kristina Nelson (1985) studies the practices of Egyptian reciters in the 1980s, the same figures who became renowned the world over in the following decade or more because of the popularity of their recordings. Across the Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority worlds of Islam in the late twentieth century, the recitation recordings of a few Egyptian reciters (many of whom trained in Classical Arabic music) were highly influential and offered models for aspiring reciters transnationally. The singing of the great women vocalists from the Arab world, such as Fairouz, Warda, and above all Umm Kulthūm, has influenced the improvisational styles of these performers as well as those who have come after them. Examples of contemporary recitation representing regions all over the world may be heard on the sound recording accompanying Sells (1999).

The Recited Qurʾān and Contemporary Islamic Revitalization

In the late twentieth century, changes in technology coupled with the global Islamic awakening have encouraged the popularity of the widespread and popular practice of the recitation of the Qurʾān. Evidence of this is a worldwide women's mosque movement that focuses on reciting the Qurʾān in mosques and improving recitation technique. Transnational connections support curricula for teaching recitation at all levels. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Egyptian government sponsored many of the most renowned Egyptian reciters to travel to Southeast Asia, a region with as many Muslims as the entire Arabic-speaking world, in order to teach and to perform as a global Islamic outreach.

Daʿwa is a Qurʾānic term interpreted and applied in different ways in different global contexts. Most basically, the term means a "call" to deepen one's own, or encourage others', Islamic piety. As such, it has been a crucial concept in the historical propagation of the Islamic religious tradition; this has been the case especially for certain historical traditions in specific. *Daʿwa* is a key concept for how the Qurʾān is understood as a basis of contemporary Islamic revitalization movements. Qurʾānic *daʿwa* supports recitational aesthetics and schooling as a primary basis for educative programs among Muslims of diverse orientations.

In the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world, Indonesia, the recitation of the Qurʾān has been the focus of an energetic movement in Islamic revitalization since the last decades of the twentieth century. The region of Southeast Asia is well known for world-class recitation, evidenced in the popularity of the woman reciter from Jakarta, Hj. Maria Ulfah. Southeast Asia has also long been known for the production of exceedingly short, clear, and precise methods and materials for teaching and learning about Islam and the Qurʾān. In Indonesia in the 1990s, mainstream *daʿwa* was viewed as an invitation to voluntary Islamic piety issued to Muslims, and much of this *daʿwa* emphasized engagement with the recited Qurʾān. Examples of the energy of this movement are the massive *Baitul Qurʾan* (“House of the Qurʾān”) exhibit near Jakarta, as well as the promotion of a wide array of Qurʾānic arts like recitation and calligraphy.

In Indonesia in the 1990s and later, as the Qurʾān increasingly became the focus of programs to promote Islamic engagement, learning to read the Qurʾān became the basis of a widespread revitalization movement. New pedagogies blended with traditional methods of teaching and learning recitation. Popular activities ranged from basic study of *tajwīd* to performance in the highly proficient *mujawwad* style of recitation. The phenomenon of Qurʾānic learning and engagement has not been limited to young people in Indonesia; it has also included mature Muslims who labeled themselves as “learners.” As part of a resurgent movement in the fundamentals of religious practice in Indonesia during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, religiously oriented individuals actively adopted and promoted projects such as local and national Qurʾān recitation competitions, a widespread movement in Qurʾān kindergartens, revitalized efforts to memorize the Qurʾān, and lively women’s mosque groups trained on the development of reading skills.

In Indonesia, virtuosic readings in the *mujawwad* style have not been appreciated most intensively in terms of inducing heightened experiential states, but instead in terms of the tendency of listeners to attempt actively and with full effort to emulate that very performance. In Indonesia, expert performances from the Arab world and by Indonesians have doubled as pedagogy for ordinary practitioners, disseminated and mediated by competition frameworks and other programs and interests. Under these educationally oriented influences, a great variety of material – including the recordings of great Egyptian reciters – has become in Indonesia educational *kurikulum*. In Indonesia, reciters at all levels were instructed to listen avidly to these performances in order to improve their *mujawwad* Qurʾān recitation, and especially to master the modal system.

Contests for the recitation of the Qurʾān were also interpreted in Indonesia to be a form of *daʿwa*. The increasing popularity of Qurʾān reciting and recitation contests, and their promotion by various organizations over several decades, has contributed to an explosion of interest, and new media and techniques, for the study and appreciation of the recited Qurʾān in Southeast Asia. Possible controversy over the voicing of the speech of God as a competition was overcome in Indonesia by recognizing the positive effects of the events for Islamic youth. Recitation tournaments, especially the National Contest for the Recitation of the Qurʾān (“Musabaqa Tilawatil Qurʾan,” MTQ), had come to be viewed by many in Indonesia as an avenue for *syiʿar Islam*, or the propagation and

deepening of Islamic practice through an appreciation of Qurʾānic knowledge and ability, as well as an avenue for the expression of distinctive aspects of Indonesian Islamic piety within the context of the global Muslim community. Competitions, as *syiʿar Islam*, were understood to be simultaneously a form of education and an invitation to Muslim practice. They show how Qurʾān recitation, as a practice of piety, is being revitalized globally as the basis of movements of Islamic awakening in the contemporary Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority worlds.

Conclusion

The recitation of the Qurʾān is foundational to Islamic worship and piety. It is central to the Qurʾān's depiction of itself and its own reading. As a Qurʾānic science, branches of the science of reading relate to classical fields of Islamic learning such as grammar, law and exegesis, aesthetics and piety; it is now the bases of some contemporary Muslim revitalization movements. In all of these domains, Qurʾān recitation is not just a personal or individual religious act. The theme of the sociality of the recitation of the Qurʾān echoes throughout the classical literature, even interiorized systems such as that of al-Ghazālī. Al-Bukhārī and other major *ḥadīth* collections, for example, relate the report that Muḥammad said, "The best among you are those who learn the Qurʾān and teach it to others" (transmitted on the authority of ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān). This is echoed in the special status given to memorizers or those who "preserve" the Qurʾān on behalf of religious community. In the contemporary world, educative programs for Qurʾānic reading are increasingly popular, as are the recordings of proficient reciters. Teaching, learning, practicing, and appreciating the recited Qurʾān are voluntary open-ended projects, drawing inspiration from the models of others' piety. In reading the Qurʾān aloud, the Qurʾān itself states that Muslims may affect others' religiosity and thereby build religious community: "The believers are only they whose hearts tremble when God is mentioned; and, when His signs [or "verses," the Qurʾān] are recited to them, they multiply in faith and put their trust in their Lord" (Q 8:2).

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