IQSA

Volume 2 – 2017

العدد الثاني – ٢٠١٧

Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association

مجلة الجمعية الدولية للدراسات القرآنية

Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association

The International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA) was incorporated in 2014 as a learned society with a mission to "foster qur'ānic scholarship." In the spirit of that mission, IQSA seeks to support the academic formation of specialists in Qur'ānic Studies, to bring students and scholars of the Qur'ān together in fruitful dialogue and collaboration, and to establish clear lines of communication among scholars working in different nations, publishing in different languages, and studying in institutions of different types. IQSA also supports Qur'ānic Studies scholarship of high technical quality. The publication of the *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* (*JIQSA*) is thus an important component of IQSA's pursuit of its founding mission.

The goal of IQSA, as a learned society, is not to promote any particular academic perspective on the Qur'ān, but rather to be a home for scholars with diverse perspectives and interests who share a commitment to academic rigor. IQSA supports those who work on the Qur'ān's relationship to the Bible and biblical literature, qur'ānic manuscripts and Arabic epigraphy, the historical context of the Qur'ān in Late Antiquity, questions of qur'ānic coherence (*naẓm*), qur'ānic aesthetics, the history of qur'ānic interpretation, qur'ānic language and rhetoric, and other topics. *JIQSA* accordingly is a host for contributions on the full diversity of subjects within the many subfields of Qur'ānic Studies, and aims to become a forum for rich scholarly conversations about the Qur'ān.

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REMEMBRANCE: ANDREW RIPPIN (1950–2016)

MICHAEL E. PREGILL

On Tuesday, November 29, 2016, Andrew Rippin passed away at his home in Victoria, British Columbia.[1] Professor Emeritus at the University of Victoria since 2013—where he was formerly Professor of History and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities—Andrew (or Andy as he was known to some) was an esteemed colleague, revered mentor, and scholarly inspiration to many members of the IQSA community.

Entering the fields of Qur'ānic and Islamic Studies in the 1980s, Andrew was an astonishingly prolific scholar, helping to shape these fields for almost four decades.[2] He was author or editor of two dozen well-known textbooks, anthologies, and thematic volumes; some eighty journal articles and book chapters; and literally hundreds of encyclopedia entries and reviews. For scholars of the Qur'ān, Andrew was perhaps best known for his profound impact on the study of *tafsīr* in particular. His numerous surveys and introductory works allow the aspiring student of the Qur'ān and its interpretation to both grasp the immensity of the field and appreciate its transformation over the decades since he published his earliest attempt to take stock of the state of the field some thirty-five years ago.[3]

1. A shorter version of this obituary notice was published online on the IQSA website on December 1, 2016 (https://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/2016/12/01/ripar/).

2. On the influence Andrew has had on the study of the Qur'ān in the Islamic world, see Majid Daneshgar, "Western Non-Muslim Qur'anic Studies in Muslim Academic Contexts: On Rippin's Works from the Middle East to the Malay-Indonesian World," in Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh (eds.), *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin* (TSQ 11; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 367–385.

3. "The Present Status of *Tafsīr* Studies," *MW* 7 (1982): 224–238. Just a few years after receiving his doctorate, Andrew was already exerting a significant impact on the field: in 1985 he organized an important conference at the University of Calgary featuring a host of scholars who were—or would become—titans of the study of Qur'ān and *tafsīr*. Andrew edited the proceedings from that conference and published them as *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); forty years on, the volume remains indispensable, as its reprinting by Gorgias Press in 2012 indicates.

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441/jiqsa.2.2017.o001

Seeking to apprehend the full range of subjects covered in Andrew's publications, one is struck by the sheer breadth of his interests and expertise. Already in the articles published during his first decade of activity in the field of Qur'ānic Studies, Andrew touches on a number of subjects that would be of continuing interest to him throughout his career. These include the complex relationship between doctrine, grammar, and lexicography in the formation of the *tafsīr* tradition; the intertwining of Qur'ān and *tafsīr* with Jewish and Christian scriptural, parascriptural, and exegetical cultures; the origins of Muslim attempts to impose hermeneutic frameworks linked to the biography of Muḥammad and accounts of the process of revelation such as *naskh* and *asbāb al-nuzūl* upon the Qur'ān; the benefits that bringing epigraphic and archaeological data to bear in the interpretation of the Qur'ān might potentially yield; and the construction of authority figures in the received tradition—most notably ʿAbd Allāh Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687)—to demarcate certain strands of exegesis as ancient in pedigree and thus of greater legitimacy than others.[4]

Today, *Tafsīr* Studies has clearly emerged as a vibrant field of inquiry. That we can now recognize it as such is in no small part due to Andrew's tireless efforts in this regard. Andrew long advocated for scholars to take the Qur'ān seriously as a primary text that reflects its late antique origins—and so to not be slavishly dependent upon classical Muslim commentary to discern its meaning—while at the same time recognizing the value of *tafsīr* and other branches of the *ʿulūm al-Qur'ān* as significant in their own right. That is, he emphasized the necessity of striking a balance between reading the Qur'ān on its own terms and understanding the importance of how Muslims have made sense of the Qur'ān as scripture over the last 1,400 years of Islamic

4. See, e.g.: "Al-Zuhrī, *Naskh al-Qur'ān* and the Problem of Early *Tafsīr* Texts," *BSOAS* 47 (1984): 22–43; "Saʿadya Gaon and Genesis 22: Aspects of Jewish-Muslim Interaction and Polemic," in William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks (eds.), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions: Papers Presented at the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies, Center for Judaic Studies, University of Denver* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 33–46; "The Function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *BSOAS* 51 (1988): 1–20; "RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs," in Wael B. Hallaq and Donald P. Little (eds.), *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 153–168; "*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* and Criteria for Dating Early *Tafsīr* Texts," *JSAI* 18 (1994): 38–83. My own research on the lost *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī and the corpus of traditions attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih would have been impossible to conceive without Andrew's pioneering work: Michael E. Pregill, "Methodologies for the Dating of Exegetical Works and Traditions: Can the Lost *Tafsīr* of Kalbī be Recovered from *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (also known as *al-Wāḍiḥ*)?" in Karen Bauer (ed.), *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th–9th/15th c.)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013), 393–453; "*Isrāʾīliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy: Wahb b. Munabbih and the Early Islamic Versions of the Fall of Adam and Eve," *JSAI* 34 (2008): 215–284.

history, appreciating the way exegesis functions as an arena in which Muslim beliefs, behavioral norms, and values are expressed and shaped.

In promoting this agenda in his scholarship, Andrew sought to advance the approach of John Wansbrough (d. 2002) in a particularly constructive (as well as generally more accessible) way. However, unlike many revisionists, Andrew drew on the insights and implications of Wansbrough's work for understanding both the Qur'ān and the traditional sources on the origins of Islam without devaluing Muslim tradition or diminishing its claims. He shared this approach with a number of Wansbrough's students, including Patricia Crone, G. R. Hawting, and Norman Calder. As Emran El-Badawi puts it in his obituary notice for Andrew:

> Andrew shared the skepticism of his mentor … about the narrative structures of Qur'anic exegesis and prophetic traditions. This skepticism, however, did not cause Andrew to dismiss these corpora outright, but rather to deepen his exploration of classical Islamic tradition as a whole.[5]

This approach stands in stark contrast to an historical-critical approach to the Qur'ān that discards traditional exegesis as an impediment to getting at the 'original' meaning of the text.

It is thus no exaggeration to say that both the revival of interest in the study of the Qur'ān over the last decade and the flourishing of the study of *tafsīr* in the same period have both been greatly encouraged by Andrew's broad and empathetic approach, and well as by his many specific contributions in publishing, teaching, and mentorship.

In 2016, shortly before his death, Andrew was honored with a Festschrift edited by Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh: *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), featuring chapters by almost twenty prominent contemporary scholars of Islam as well as two vivid personal tributes by Jane McAuliffe and Claude Gilliot.[6] The richness and

5. Emran El-Badawi, "In Memoriam: Andrew Rippin, 1950–2016," *RMES* 51 (2017): 155–157. As a young scholar, Andrew received his Ph.D. under Charles Adams at McGill in 1981 but sought out Wansbrough's mentorship as well, and his attempts to translate Wansbrough's ideas for a broader audience are still noteworthy for their clarity and concision. See his "Literary Analysis of *Qur'ān*, *Tafsīr*, and *Sīra*: the Methodologies of John Wansbrough," in Richard C. Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 151–163, 227–232, and compare his carefully annotated edition of one of Wansbrough's classic works: John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, with foreword, translations, and expanded notes by Andrew Rippin (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004 [1977]).

6. Jane McAuliffe's piece is particularly valuable for placing much of Andrew's

sophistication of this volume is testimony to the massive impact Andrew had on the field, though the short biographical notes and comprehensive bibliography one may find there mostly capture his contribution to the field in quantitative terms. The true depth of his impact is almost unfathomable, judging from the hundreds of students, colleagues, and friends he influenced over the decades, and who will remember Andrew as the very model of thorough and exacting—yet humane and engaged—scholarship.

We recall with particular gratitude that Andrew was instrumental in the foundation of the International Qur'anic Studies Association and made many significant contributions to the formation of the society in its initial years. He served as the inaugural president in 2014,[7] and advised the society's leadership on numerous matters, as well as advocating on behalf of the organization and its mission in that critical early period. Shortly before Andrew's death, the IQSA Board of Directors announced the creation of the Andrew Rippin Best Paper Prize, to be awarded each year to an outstanding paper delivered at the Annual Meeting by a graduate student or early career scholar. The inaugural prize was awarded in 2017 to Jawad Qureshi for his paper from the 2016 Annual Meeting, "Ring Composition, Virtues, and Qur'anic Prophetology in Surat Yusuf (Q 12)," which is published here in this volume in revised form. Subsequently, in 2018 the second prize was awarded to Johanne Christiansen for her paper "'And Their Prayer at the House is Nothing but a Whistling and a Clapping of Hands' (Q 8:35): Negotiating Processions in the Qur'an." We thank the donors and supporters of our organization who made establishing the Andrew Rippin Best Paper Prize—only a small token of Andrew's enduring scholarly legacy—possible.

work in context, given her own titanic contributions to the field and numerous collaborations with Andrew over the years; see "A Concluding Appreciation," in Daneshgar and Saleh (eds.), *op. cit.*, 386–395.

7. At the Annual Meeting in San Diego that year, Andrew gave the response to the keynote address by Angelika Neuwirth (delivered in absentia by Nicolai Sinai); both papers can be downloaded at https://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/publications/papers/.

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LOT AND HIS OFFER: 2016 IQSA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

FARID ESACK

Abstract

The Lot narrative has received significant attention in qur'ānic scholarship and *tafsīr* literature, both as part of the genre of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (stories of the prophets) and as the foundational narrative informing Muslim ethics on homoeroticism, sodomy, and, more recently, homosexuality. However, Lot's offer of his daughters to a mob of would-be rapists (Q Hūd 11:78; Ḥijr 15:71) has received precious little attention in early and—more surprisingly—contemporary qur'ānic scholarship. While a large number of characters feature in the Qur'ān as emissaries of God, the narrative about Lot is regarded as paradigmatic for proper Muslim behavior. Lot's offer of his daughters thus has serious implications for questions about the Qur'ān's endorsement or recognition of sexual violence, women's agency, and the premise that women are the property of men. The moral ambiguity of Lot's offer is complicated by the Qur'ān's affirmation of his status as a "trustworthy messenger of God" (Q Nūr 24:162) and, for many Muslims, by the later emergence of a largely unchallenged doctrine of the infallibility (*ʿiṣmah*) of all God's messengers. In this presentation, I consider the Lot narrative, and particularly the offer of his daughters, as someone who grapples with the Qur'ān as both a scholar and a lover of the text. As an engaged scholar-lover of the Qur'ān, I am embedded in a multiplicity of identities and discourses, lodged between a refusal to ignore the contemporary ethical challenges that a linguistic and historical reading of the text presents on the one hand and a simultaneous abiding love for the text on the other, and deeply skeptical of hegemonic games masquerading as disinterested scholarship.

Keywords

Lot, prophets, sexual ethics, *ʿiṣmah* (infallibility), hermeneutics, liberation theology

> The story that I am about to tell is a horrible one; I beg that daughters and fathers should hold themselves aloof, while I sing, or if they find my songs enchanting, let them refuse to believe this part of my tale, and suppose that it never happened.
>
> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (1955, 233)

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441/jiqsa.2.2017.a002

Introduction

It is an enormous pleasure and a singular honor to deliver the 2016 IQSA presidential address.[1] IQSA puts a lot of thought into its election process and, while it is a young organization, it has generally delivered on its choices. However, as was the case with the recent US presidential election, there is no guarantee that the choice is going to be a worthy one. And so, with this caveat, I deliver my address.

Other than the awkwardness of Lot's offer itself, let me forewarn about two other possibly awkward elements in my address: the first, toward the beginning, is overtly political; the second, toward the end, is very personal.

One final caveat: This presentation pushes the envelope somewhat in what may be properly described as "Qur'ānic Studies." In many ways, IQSA represents a welcome collapse of the old stereotypes of "irenic" versus "critical" scholarship, and while there is still reluctance in many quarters to embrace hermeneutics, particularly reception hermeneutics, and the *tafsīr* tradition—elaborations of the texts as an intrinsic part of textual studies—as a part of Qur'ānic Studies, some may suggest that I am veering too close to the confessional, if not apologetic, for scholarly comfort. Being a liberation theologian and an engaged Qur'ān scholar who consistently tries to locate his work in the daily struggle of ordinary people for dignity and justice on the one hand and the global forces which relentlessly subvert these on the other, I am comfortable with the disruption of many comforts, including my own.

Working on this subject has been a painful process. I did not anticipate the debilitating and depressing personal impact that working on a gang rape story would have on me, nor the corrosive impact that encountering a wealth of critical feminist scholarship on the Lot story would have on my settled and loving embrace of a question-filled conviction about the Qur'ān as the Word of God.[2]

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1. This paper is a revised version of my address delivered on November 18, 2016 in San Antonio, Texas, USA. While I have changed some of its contents, I have retained its informal oral tone.

2. Unlike the biblical narrative about Lot and his family, the qur'ānic one terminates with the destruction of the people of Lot and his wife and the escape of Lot and his daughters from this fate. The qur'ānic text thus does not lend itself to the rich discussion about the relationship between Lot and his daughters as may be the case with Biblical Studies as seen in the works of scholars such as Melissa Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology," *JSOT* 26 (2002): 29–46; Katherine B. Low, "The Sexual Abuse of Lot's Daughters: Reconceptualizing Kinship for the Sake of Our Daughters," *JFSR* 26 (2010): 37–54; Talia Sutskover, "Lot and His Daughters (Gen 19:30–38): Further Literary and Stylistic Examinations," *JHebS* 11 (2011): 2–11; and Jonathan Grossman,

The old analogy of a painful experience being akin to having a tooth pulled did come to my mind often. However, the invariably heretical implication of a bad tooth, which can possibly be toxic and require extraction, being applied to a single verse of the Qur'ān makes it too much for me to commit to. So here, colleagues, you have only the passing thought, in a relatively safe space—though, as the end of the people of Lot and other rejecting folk shows, divine intervention can strike with unimaginable suddenness.

And yet, as ever, I can do nothing but share my insights in ways that challenge me and those who care to listen to me. I do so carefully, hesitantly, and heuristically. Above all, I do so as someone who literally trembles in the presence of this Qur'ān and who is ever-mindful of the ideological and hegemonic contexts wherein much of scholarship, including qur'ānic scholarship, takes place.

When Our Heroes Are No Longer as They Seemed—and We Are No Longer Who We Were

The recent 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to Bob Dylan raised more than a few eyebrows. I venture to suggest that it would have invited much more than raised eyebrows if it were not for the special space that he occupies in the hearts, aesthetic imaginations, and personal histories of many of those engaged in the field of literature—scholars, writers, and critics.

Now, my ear for music is seriously impaired and the only song of his that I am familiar with is his "Blowin' in the Wind," which I learned during my teens as part of a repertoire of early liberation struggle songs—at least within the white liberal circles that I then moved in.[3] Looking back, some of these songs resonated with me quite deeply because of their melancholic and lamenting quality—but only in a communal setting. The one song, however, that lived with me during my quiet life strolling home from school (after hours of seemingly endless tedium and ultimately futile attempts to beat me into subservience) was "Blowin' in the Wind." The suggestion in the song, however tentative, of the certainty of an end to indifference and human suffering was deeply comforting. I had since forgotten all about Dylan until his recent Nobel Prize and the debates in literary circles surrounding it, which raised important questions about whether giving this award to a musician

"'Associative Meanings' in the Character Evaluation of Lot's Daughters," *CBQ* 76 (2014): 40–57.

3. During my teens, I belonged to, and at one stage headed, National Youth Action, a South African organization comprising largely white high school students who campaigned for racial equality in education.

"dramatically redefined the boundaries of literature"[4] and whether music can be literature.[5]

In some ways, such questions can be raised about the Qur'ān. Initially regarded as spoken and recited word, it now also exists for scholars as literature, with an increasing number of scholars also committed to studying the relationship between the Qur'ān as an oral discourse and its meaning.[6]

While Dylan's creation—his *kalām al-makhlūq* ("created speech")—is inevitably going to get increasing attention as literature after its canonization by the Nobel Prize Committee, what will happen to it as music? How will we search for literary and historical meaning in texts that were not intended as such—at least not in the way that critical scholars may want to frame the quest for meaning?

Equally consequential for those who also locate themselves and their scholarship within the context of a global struggle for justice, as I do, what happens when one rather belatedly becomes aware of Dylan's support for what you believe to be an apartheid state acting in violation of human rights and international law? When, amidst the outpouring of praise and nostalgia, recent reminders emerged of Dylan's support for Israel in his 1983 song "Neighborhood Bully,"[7] I posted a rather self-righteous note on my Facebook page in which I said: "Well, I loved Dylan, at least, 'Blowin' in the Wind,' but I love the truth more! Bye, bye, Bob Dylan." A friend responded saying that while he did not wish to defend Dylan, he did want to cite Taylor and Israelson's work on Dylan, in mitigation:

> [A]nd yet Dylan did not become a Christian Zionist [after his discovery of Christianity as a personal faith]. Why not? Dylan's newfound Christianity was in many ways less-culture-bound than the average American evangelical at the time—partly because it was new and he approached the Bible with the fresh

4. Ben Sisario, Alexandra Alter, and Sewell Chan, "Bob Dylan Wins Nobel Prize, Redefining Boundaries of Literature," *New York Times*, October 13, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/arts/music/bob-dylan-nobel-prize-literature.html.

5. Craig Morgan Teicher, "Why Bob Dylan's Songs are Literature," *The New Republic*, October 14, 2016, https://newrepublic.com/article/137811/bob-dylans-songs-literature.

6. The most important recent works in this regard are probably William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (2nd ed.; Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003); and Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (2nd ed.; Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2007).

7. Michael F. Brown, "Bob Dylan's Embrace of Israel's War Crimes," *Electronic Intifada*, October 18, 2016, https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/michael-f-brown/bob-dylans-embrace-israels-war-crimes.

> eyes of a convert. Also, he had a more-spiritual, less-politicized understanding of Bible eschatology. Finally, he remained an anarchist in his ideology after his conversion. When it was released in 1983, "Neighborhood Bully" was widely seen as a pro-Israeli government song. This was apparently incorrect. In a 1984 interview, Dylan suggested that the song was referring to Israel during the days of the future Battle of Armageddon rather than to the current Israeli government.[8]

Confronted with some of the Qur'ān's more awkward moments, one could paraphrase this sort of apologetic:

> Yet, given its context, the Qur'ān was not unashamedly tribalistic or misogynistic; the new religion was less culture-bound and more universal than the average Arab at that time.… In interviews with later believers, it was argued that the misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations of the text were apparently incorrect; the text has a deeper meaning, a more egalitarian and gender-sensitive message—not apparent to the casual or superficial reader.

In the case of Dylan, although he is in a state of semi-*ghaybah* (occultation), he is still around to explain or reinterpret his text. However, from the context of "Neighborhood Bully," the location where it was first produced, and other statements that Dylan made both at that time and subsequently in support of Israel,[9] it would appear to me that he was being economical with the truth—a revisionist without the courage to say that he was wrong, that his text was flawed.

Similar dilemmas—of much greater magnitude—abound for Muslim believers who grew up with their own infallible and immutable religio-cultural icon, the Qur'ān. As I elaborate in my book, *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction*, the Qur'ān appeals to our deeper mystical selves in the familiarity of its recitation during the most intimate moments of our spiritual and social lives: from those sublime moments at both our entrance into this world and our exit from it, to the more mundane—an invocation in fear of an approaching dog, a few verses read aloud to ensure that the meal being prepared would extend to a few extra mouths, silent requests deep in the night that it will intervene with the Transcendent on a Day when all ties of familial kinship will abandon us. *Tilāwah*—that melodious and stirring recitation of the Qur'ān—is for

8. Jeff Taylor and Chad Israelson, *The Political World of Bob Dylan: Freedom and Justice, Power and Sin* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 222.

9. See Brown, "Bob Dylan's Embrace of Israel's War Crimes"; Gabe Friedman, "Bob Dylan's Forgotten Pro-Israel Song, Revisited," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 23, 2016, https://www.jta.org/2016/05/23/life-religion/bob-dylans-forgotten-pro-israel-song-revisited.

the believer nothing short of a magical experience of the presence of the Transcendent.[10]

For Muslims to walk away from a single song or stanza in the qur'ānic collection is seemingly to walk away from all the works of its producer. And what are we left with if the producer is only known through the production, especially if the production is synonymous with the producer?—notwithstanding Mu'tazili accusations of heresy for doing so.[11]

While the Qur'ān in its earliest stages existed primarily as an oral discourse, it was never just that—music to soothe, for the believer to enjoy, to transport them into another world of bliss. From the beginning, it was regarded by the first Muslims as God's active intervention in the lives of the believers and as a warning to others.

The Lot narrative appears as one example in a series of unheeded warnings resulting in the destruction of a disbelieving community. Upon hearing of the presence in the house of Lot of a group of handsome men, a mob of would-be violent rapists and Sodomites attack his house and, in a panic, Lot offers his daughter to them as a way of saving his honor and that of his guests. Lot's offer to the Sodomites in this narrative poses a particular ethical problem for believers/scholars: the apparent condoning—if not encouragement—of gang rape by a prophet of God regarded as *maʿṣūm* (infallible, or protected from committing sin).

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10. Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 13–18.

11. The debate around the createdness of the Qur'ān is one of the most intense in the history of *kalām* (Islamic scholastic theology), contributing to lasting fissures in the community. Those proclaiming the doctrine of the Qur'ān's uncreatedness were accused of *shirk* (association with God) by the major proponents of the doctrine of its createdness, the Mu'tazilah. While the origins of this debate are unclear, it culminated in the *miḥnah*, a type of inquisition, initiated by the Mu'tazili caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–833) who, in the last year of his reign, demanded a public affirmation of the doctrine of the Qur'ān's createdness from all the judges in the service of the state. The *miḥnah* lasted for some sixteen years until it was reversed by the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861). This reversal not only heralded the return—with a vengeance—of the doctrine of the Qur'ān's uncreatedness, but its extension to the notion that even the recitation of the Qur'ān and its echoes were uncreated. Furthermore, not only were the doubters of this extended doctrine denounced as *kuffār* (heretics), but so were those who doubted their *kufr* (heresy). See Walter Melville Patton, *Aḥmed ibn Ḥanbal and the Miḥna: A Biography of the Imâm Including an Account of the Moḥammedan Inquisition Called the Miḥna, 218–234 A.H.* (Leiden: Brill, 1897); Wilferd Madelung, "The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran," in *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985; revised ed. of *Orientalia Hispanica* 1, 1974). In contemporary times, the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān has increasingly been challenged by scholars—both traditional reformers such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1906) and revisionists such as Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010).

The Dylan that many of us knew was interwoven with our earlier idealistic selves when dreams, and sometimes only dreams, mattered. Now, we have grown—into and away from; now, we may be more or less sober, more or less critical; and some of us have moved on from being theologians to scholars of the Qur'ān. Some of us were once only immersed in our faith and in our desperation to see a more just world and in our willingness to marshal everything at our disposal into this battle. We invoked qur'ānic texts both as bullets against our racist, sexist, and elite enemies, and as a balm for our wounds incurred during those battles. Now we have been contaminated by critical scholarship and the toothpaste seemingly cannot go back into the tube.

As the below discussion on *ʿiṣmah* will show, it is not only we as scholars and theologians who shift and undergo transformations, but also the religions, dogmas, and creeds (and as many in Qur'ānic Studies would add, the Qur'ān itself) that we interrogate, critique, study, and (for many of us) confess.

Lot's Story in the Qur'ān

Yes, it is Lot's story in the Qur'ān, not the story of his unnamed wife—that anonymized *ʿajūz* (old woman) (Q Ṣaffāt 37:135)[12]—nor that of his and his wife's[13] rather characterless daughters.[14]

12. "Lot, too, was one of the messengers. When we delivered him and his family all together, except for an old woman (*ʿajūz*) who stayed behind, then we destroyed the others" (Q Ṣaffāt 37:133–136). Other qur'ānic texts refer to "your woman" (*imraʾataka*) (Q Hūd 11:81) and "his woman" (*imraʾatuhu*) (Q Ḥijr 15:16 and ʿAnkabūt 29:32). This expression, unlike its common use in English, does not have any negative connotations. In Q Raʿd 12:30 the wife of the king whom Joseph encounters is referred to as *imraʾat al-ʿazīz* ("the woman of the powerful," i.e., the king). When given the tidings of the birth of Isaac, Abraham's wife Sara describes herself as *ʿajūz* (Q Hūd 11:72).

13. None of the Islamic sources consulted speak about "Lot and his wife's daughters" or "their daughters." This is in large part cultural and remains common in many societies where the mother's relationship to the children is often underplayed in public. There may also be a subtle attempt to ignore any relationship between the 'good' daughters and father on the one hand and the 'bad' mother on the other.

14. There are differences among the exegetes about the number and names of Lot and his wife's daughters. According to Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, some exegetes said that Lot had three daughters while others said he had two, whom al-Qurṭubī names as Zaytā and Zaʿūrā'; al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān* (10 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), 5.68. Cf. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn ʿAjībah, *Al-Baḥr al-madid fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-majīd* (8 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2010), 3.231, where their names are given as Rīthā and Ghawthā; Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd (3 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), 2.126, where their names are given as Rīthā and Zaʿūthā.

The Lot story, in terms of the frequency of its appearance, receives considerably more attention in the Qur'ān than the stories of most other prophets. Beside Muḥammad, Lot and Abraham are the only other qur'ānic prophets to occupy central places in the contemporary Muslim religious imagination: Lot in the area of sexual ethics,[15] and Abraham in the area of religious rituals, particularly those connected to the Ḥajj.

Like nearly all the qur'ānic stories, the story of Lot is found scattered over a number of different *sūrah*s—the earliest passages probably being in Sūrat al-Najm (Q 53:53–54) and Sūrat al-Ḥāqqah (Q 69:9–10), which are both regarded as early Meccan. All the other appearances are also early Meccan, with the exception of Sūrat al-Tawbah (Q 9:70), Sūrat al-Ḥajj (Q 22:43), and Sūrat al-Taḥrīm (Q 66:10–12).[16]

All the relatively longer accounts (Q Hūd 11:74–83; Ḥijr 15:61–77; Shuʿarā' 26:160–173; ʿAnkabūt 29:28-35) are framed within a polemical context to vindicate the veracity of Muḥammad's mission and to assure him that he will ultimately emerge victorious. Not atypically, the narrative does not flow easily and there are several gaps in the narration. It is in the *tafsīr*, and particularly in the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (stories of the prophets), that qur'ānic bones are covered—in this case, quite literally—in flesh and blood. This literature draws heavily on local folklore and biblical material with significant

15. Leemhuis draws attention to a generally glossed-over part of Lot's life, that of being an early example of someone who had to flee for the sake of his religion. The Mu'tazili scholar Abū'l-Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad al-Hamadānī (d. 415/1025) mentions that the Prophet Muḥammad had compared Lot to his own Companion (and eventual caliph) ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān, who during the first *hijrah* fled to Ethiopia with his wife and daughter: "He [Muḥammad] bade them farewell, embraced ʿUthmān and said: 'He is the first after Lot, who because of his religion emigrated with his household'"; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwah*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm ʿUthmān (2 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-ʿArabiyyah, 1966), 218. Leemhuis notes that this illustrates that "not only was Lūṭ an illustrious predecessor of Muhammed, but also … Lūṭ's example of rightfulness and steadfastness in warning ungodly fellow citizens was worthy of imitation"; Fred Leemhuis, "Lūṭ and His People in the Koran in Early Commentaries," in Edward Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar (eds.), *Sodom's Sin: Genesis 18–19 and Its Interpretations* (TBN 7; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 97–113, 103.

16. Nora K. Schmid has attached much significance to the qur'ānic chronology of the different features of the story, particularly those pertaining to Lot's wife. Schmid suggests that the story be read in terms of the Qur'ān as a text reflecting the migration of Muḥammad's community from its tribal milieu into the textual world of the biblical tradition and argues that the figure of Lot's wife is reconfigured during this process, being purposefully introduced into the story of Sodom's destruction. Nora K. Schmid, "Lot's Wife: Late Antique Paradigms of Sense and the Qur'ān," in Angelika Neuwirth and Michael Sells (eds.), *Qur'ānic Studies Today* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 52–80.

tweaks where these do not fit in with Muslim doctrinal presumptions of *ʿiṣmat al-anbiyāʾ* (the infallibility of the prophets).

Mentioned twenty-seven times in the Qurʾān,[17] Lot is described as an early believer in Abraham and a sojourner towards God (Q ʿAnkabūt 29:26) who was saved along with Abraham and travelled with him until they arrived in "the land which [God has] blessed" (Q Anbiyāʾ 21:71); he is "favored above all peoples" (Q Anʿām 6:87); "endowed with knowledge and wisdom" (Q Anbiyāʾ 21:74); "an apostle worthy of trust" (Q Shuʿarāʾ 26:162); "among the messengers" (Q Ṣāffāt 37:133); and among "those who are grateful" (Q Qamar 54:35). The Qurʾān is silent on any aspect of Lot's mission or message, other than the warnings directed to the violent mob of Sodomites attacking his house, as either a crime on its own or related to it and the consequences thereof.

The story of Lot in Sūrat Hūd is, at a glance, only incidentally connected to one of a number of events in the life of his more prominent uncle and brother-in-law, the patriarch Abraham. Unexpected guests (*ḍayf*) of Abraham,[18] whom we quickly learn are envoys/angels sent by God, make a brief stop-over to Abraham and Sarah to give them the good news of the birth of a child, Isaac (v. 69; cf. 15:51). Explaining their haste and inability to enjoy their host's hospitality—to the alarm of Abraham, the personification of hospitality in the Qurʾān[19]—they announce that they are angels sent to

17. The same number of times as Joseph, but less than Moses (126 times), Abraham (sixty-eight times), Noah (forty-three times), and Jesus (twenty-nine times).

18. The Qurʾān employs the singular in all its references to this [group of] guest[s], although from the context of the story as it unfolds, it is evident that there were at least two of them.

19. Contemporary Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars who argue for queer-friendly interpretation of the Qurʾān make much of the hospitality dimensions of the Abraham-angels encounter as a prelude to the Lot story. Abraham, well known as the personification of hospitality, displays the exemplary behavior of a host towards his guest. The theme of hospitality is further reinforced later in the story in the encounter between first the daughters of Lot and, later, Lot himself and the angels. Their exemplary behavior of hospitality serves as the counterfoil against which the behavior of the people of Sodom is judged. The major crime committed by the people of Sodom and for which they were destroyed is thus presented by these scholars as their violent aggression and the violation of the rights of the stranger and the vulnerable. See Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); Renato K. Lings, *Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible* (New York: Trafford, 2003); Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Philo Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe: An Unbiased Look at Homosexuality in the Bible* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2004); Amreen Jamal, "The Story of Lot and the Qurʾān's Perception of the Morality of Same-Sex Sexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality*

destroy "the people of Lot" (v. 70). In an account that resembles Muḥammad pleading with God for a reduction in the number of daily prayers on the occasion of the *miʿrāj* (ascension to Heaven), Abraham pleads with them with a particular concern for Lot (v. 74; cf. 29:32) whereupon he is told that "the decree of your Lord has gone forth and there must come to them a chastisement that cannot be averted" (v. 76).

The place where Lot first met the angels is not specified in the Qurʾān, although the *qiṣaṣ* literature indicates that his and his wife's daughters first encountered them in fields on the outskirts of the town and—in the only indication of their righteousness—they show concern for the safety of the angels. Lot tries to dissuade them from staying over and, in doing so, indicts the men of Sodom four times—a confirmation both anticipated and required before the angels can go ahead with their plans to destroy the people of Sodom. Failing to dissuade them from bypassing the town, and foreseeing what may possibly await them, a terrified and anxious Lot requests them to wait until nightfall when he brings them to his house. A section of Sūrat Hūd (Q 11:77–82) provides a summary of this event:

> And when Our messengers came to Lot, he was anguished for them (*sīʾa bihim*) and felt for them great discomfort, and said: "This is a distressful day (*hādhā yawm ʿaṣīb*)!" And his people came to him, (as if) driven on towards him, and they were used to committing evil deeds before. He said: "O my people, these are my daughters—they are purer for you; so, fear God and do not disgrace me with my guests. Is there not among you any righteous man?" They said: "Certainly, you know that we have no claim on your daughters (*mā lanā fī banātika min ḥaqqin*), and you know what we desire." He said: "Would that I had strength to resist you or had some strong support!" They said: "O Lot, we are the messengers of your Lord. They shall not reach you. So, travel with your family for a part of the night—and let none of you turn back—except your wife. Surely whatsoever befalls them shall befall her. Surely their appointed time is the morning. Is not the morning nigh?" So, when Our commandment came to pass We overthrew it and rained upon it stones of clay, one after another…

Infallibility and Its Function in Qurʾānic Accounts of Messengers before Muḥammad

The doctrine of infallibility (*ʿiṣmah*) is the single biggest hurdle to clear for a Muslim to examine Lot's offer of his daughters in a scholarly manner without

41 (2001): 1–88; Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010); Samar Habib (ed.), *Islam and Homosexuality* (2 vols.; Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).

resorting to apologetics. Emerging in the mid-second/eighth century, the doctrine of *ʿiṣmat al-anbiyāʾ* became "embraced as doctrinal principle in some form or other by almost every Muslim sect and theological school."[20] The term *ʿiṣmah* literally means "protected" or "defended"[21] and is generally understood by Muslims as God's protection of His elect from sin despite their ability to commit such, and/or protecting their outer or inner lives from succumbing to the unlawful.[22] In the early stages of the development of this doctrine there was considerable debate around its meaning and more so around its application. Were prophets protected from committing both minor and major sins or only the latter? Did *ʿiṣmah* apply to pre-prophetic or post-prophetic lives, or both? Did it extend beyond flawlessness in their conveying of the revelation (*tablīgh*) to other aspects of their behavior? Today it implies both impeccability in conduct as well as infallibility (the impossibility of committing a sin), relating to three areas: (1) belief and conviction, (2) their mission of conveying revelation, and (3) their own actions and conduct. It is the third area in which there were some earlier differences of opinion.[23] Examining the very nuanced position of Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) on *ʿiṣmah* in relation to the Satanic Verses, Shahab Ahmed made a compelling argument that in understanding *ʿiṣmah* as infallibility, "modern scholarship is perhaps guilty of retro-jecting a formulation of Islamic orthodoxy back in to a more variegated and heterodox age."[24] He demonstrates that Ibn Taymiyyah and many other medieval scholars did not interpret *ʿiṣmah* to refer to "infallibility, immunity or

20. Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," *SIs* 87 (1998): 67–124, 69.

21. The Arabic term derives from the root *ʿ-ṣ-m*, which according to Edward Lane means to "be protected or defended," whereas Wensinck translates it as "impeccability"; see W. Madelung and E. Tyan, "Iṣma," *EI*², s.v.

22. While Sunnis limit the application of the doctrine of *ʿiṣmah* to the prophets and messengers of God, Twelver Shi'is extend it to the twelve select Imams and to the angels; Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī, *A Shīʿite Creed: A Translation of* al-Iʿtiqādātu'l-Imāmīyah *of Abū Jaʿfar, Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn*, trans. Asaf Ali Asghar Feyzee (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982), 87. Some would argue that its application to prophets and messengers originated in the Shi'i need to do so after they had applied it to the Imams. Cf. Paul E. Walker, "Impeccability," *EQ*, s.v.

23. For Sunni Muslims *ʿiṣmat al-anbiyāʾ* has now come to mean that the prophets are immune from lying and being guilty of *shirk*, both before and after being called to prophethood, and are prevented from performing any sin—particularly the *kabāʾir* (major sins)—knowingly. As for unintentional errors, Sunnis differ in this regard, with most holding that a prophet may commit an error unintentionally. Whenever the Qurʾān does mention any such sin or a departure from better conduct (Q Yūsuf 12:24; Ṭāhā 20:121), or uses the word *dhanb* or *ithm* (Q Fatḥ 48:2) (usually translated as "sin"), most translators will use the words "error" (*ghalṭ*) or "mistake"/"fault" (*khaṭaʾ*).

24. Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," 71.

impeccability," but rather to a dispensation of grace from God to not remain in error once it was committed. Quoting Ibn Taymiyyah:

> The principle established by the agreement of the community (*bi-ittifāqi'l-ummah*) is that the prophets are protected (*maʿṣūm*) in that which they convey from God… and the Muslims are agreed that no error may come to lodge therein [*lā yastaqirru fī dhālika khaṭa'atun*].[25]

For Ibn Taymiyyah and a number of other medieval scholars, a prophet may err in matters of transmitting revelation but does not persist in that error. Shahab Ahmed describes this as a "post-erratum form" of *ʿiṣmah*.[26] With the doctrinal tide having turned toward a more expansive and all-encompassing infallibility, Ibn Taymiyyah's position on *ʿiṣmah* today is largely ignored.[27] Today, regardless of the doctrinal minutiae around *ʿiṣmah*, the contemporary universal Muslim consensus is to either offer justificatory explanations or mitigating arguments when confronted by anything which detracts from the legal or moral standing of any of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān. This consensus frames any Muslim interpretation of Lot's offer of his daughters to the band of would-be rapists/Sodomites.

In framing Lot's response to the mob, other than the socio-ethical horizons of their times, all the *mufassirūn*—or at least those whose works are extant and that I examined—are constrained by the doctrine of *ʿiṣmah*. This is arguably the most significant constraint in pronouncing on these narratives and, more specifically, the utterings and ethical judgments made by the prophets.

Among the major tropes of warning are the Qur'ān's accounts of the fate of previous communities who rejected God's messengers and defied His commandments. These rather skeletal accounts appear to have been familiar to the Qur'ān's earliest listeners. Intended or not, they also served to provide Muḥammad and his community with a legitimacy and an assurance that he was not the charlatan that his detractors made him out to be. On the contrary, he was a brother and comrade in a long and noble line of messengers of God who came to remind people of their primordial covenant with God and to

25. Ibn Taymiyyah, translation adapted from citation in Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," 75–76.

26. Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," 90. According to al-Bayḍāwī, the only Muslim sect to reject the doctrine of *ʿiṣmah* was the Kharijites, based on Q 48:2; Abū'l-Khayr ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar al-Bayḍāwī, *Tawāliʿ al-anwār min matāliʿ al-anẓār*, in E. E. Calverley and J. W. Pollock (ed. and trans.), *Nature, Man and God in Medieval Islam* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1003.

27. Ahmed in fact argues that the reception of Ibn Taymiyyah's position, and its eventually being passed over, "graphically demonstrates the mutability of notions of orthodox belief in Islam"; Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," 121.

exhort them to return to faithfulness to His commands. Michael Zwettler describes these narratives as "typological prefigurement[s]" of Muḥammad's mission.[28] Other than the function of vindication, these narratives also served an additional purpose of providing comforting assurance to Muḥammad that despite the opposition and persecution that he was facing, his less-well-travelled road is indeed the correct one, and that his adversaries are the ones who will face the inevitable wrath of God. The message is clear: in the impending discomfort (to put it gently) of your adversaries, there is your comfort.

Given the function of these narratives in the Qur'ān, the messengers were imbued with a sanctity at variance with that of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. If Muḥammad was a paragon of virtue—*ʿalā khuluqin ʿaẓīmin* (Q Qalam 68:4)—then his predecessors could not possibly be otherwise. In fact, the Qur'ān also claims to be a corrector to the falsehood impugned to the messengers (Q 6:34). With the doctrine of the *ʿiṣmah* of all messengers entrenched in Islamic theology, the idea that prophets could possibly have acted unwisely in the course of fulfilling their mission, in defiance of God's commands or in a morally flawed manner, was not one readily entertained by post-second/eighth century Muslim scholars and even less so by the later ones. The idea that they could err was, however, a widely accepted one in the Qur'ān as is evident from several references (Q 2:36; 12:24; 20:121–122; 21:87; 28:16; 38:23–24; 80:1–11).

With regard to the story of Lot, I am not suggesting that had it not been for the doctrine of *ʿiṣmah*, then all the contemporary moral and ethical questions about a prophet offering his daughters to a band of rapists would have been resolved by a simple conclusion that Lot erred. Lot's response, we shall see, was part of a larger social, ethical and anthropological milieu wherein very different concerns were present than the ones that are present in the contemporary world. Although this presentation problematizes a particular manifestation of male-female, father-children dynamics—a father offering "his daughters," regardless of what is meant by "daughters" and whether the offer is one of marriage or of sex to a frenzied mob of violent rapists—the larger question remains of the contemporary value of this text as ethical advice or guidance. Ibn Taymiyyah's understanding of post-erratum *ʿiṣmah* offers some, albeit limited, possibility for the redemption of Lot in the contemporary beholder's eyes.

Given that both the context of the "actual story" as well as those wherein it was first told and subsequently re-told are oral, with a number of variants

28. Michael Zwettler, "A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of 'The Poets' and the Qur'ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority," in James L. Kugel (ed.), *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75–119, 97.

appearing in diverse historical and cultural contexts, both biblical and otherwise—a story with elements that do not meet any historical criteria of verification—one may well ask: "So why bother at all with dealing with the Lot story and the problem of his offer of his daughters?"

I am located inside and umbilically connected to a world—the world of Islam, Muslims, and the Qur'ān—where this story matters; it is both a biological accident that I find myself here as well as a position of irrational conviction. It is a form of madness that simultaneously sustains and afflicts. Like many believers who struggle to live contemporaneously, we persist in our attempts to lessen the affliction and enhance the sustenance. And then there is a minority who, like moths to flames, seemingly gravitate towards affliction in the quest for consummation.

And who knows if this is a reference to the people of Lot who rushed towards their impending doom or to would-be Sufis desperate to self-destruct in the glory of the Transcendent?

There is, however, more to this than merely a modernist desperation of wanting to live contemporaneously; for me it is also an obsession rooted in my own history as a Muslim of color living under apartheid in South Africa, and born to a mother who died at the age of fifty-two, a victim of rape—a crime which no one in our family ever uttered a word about for decades. She died as a victim of a triple oppression of race, class, and gender. Since my early childhood, I have been burdened with this obsession to see the world from the views of the undersides—the Jew in Muslim discourses, the left-handed, the Dalit people in India, the darker-skinned, the persecuted Punjabi Christians, the dispossessed Palestinians, the non-Muslim and gendered other in the Qur'ān—and now the nameless daughters of Lot.

Lot's Offer of His Daughters When Confronted by the Mob

Using an intertextual approach, Waleed Ahmed has offered the first scholarly inquiry into the qur'ānic account of Lot's offer of his daughters.[29] The only other scholarly study that I was able to locate is ʿĀ'iḍ al-Dawsarī's "*Taqdīm Lūṭ ibnatayhi li-qawmihi fī'l-Tawrāt wa'l-Qur'ān: Dirāsah muqāranah* [Lot's Offer of His Two Daughters in the Torah and the Qur'an: A Comparative Study]," a lengthy article in two parts that, while well-researched, adopts an entirely apologetic tone.[30]

29. Waleed Ahmed, "Lot's Daughters in the Qur'ān: An Investigation Through the Lens of Intertextuality," in Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its Historical Context 2* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 411–424.

30. ʿĀ'iḍ al-Dawsarī, "*Taqdīm Lūṭ ibnatayhi li-qawmihi fī'l-Tawrāt wa'l-Qur'ān: Dirāsah*

Faced with the reality of an evidently "joyfully" (*yastabshirūn*) excited male mob (Q 15:67) who came "rushing" (*yuhraʿūn*) (Q 11:78) towards him, Lot was, to put it gently, deeply distressed. He expressed his outrage at the nature of the crime of approaching men (*ityān al-rijāl*) rather than women (*min dūn al-nisāʾ*) (Q 27:55; 29:29) which—in the form of a rhetorical question—he describes as "hitherto unprecedented in worlds" (Q 7:80; 26:165–166; 29:28). His scolding morphs rapidly into a denunciation of three other crimes: (1) "obstructing the roads," (2) "practicing evil in their gatherings" (Q 29:29), and (3) being "a people who transgress" (*qawmun ʿādūn*) (Q 26:166) and "a people who engage in excesses" (*qawmun musrifūn*) (Q 36:19).[31]

The extent to which Lot's fears are connected on the one hand to the possible injury to his guests, and on the other hand to the dishonor that he faces over both his inability to protect his guests and the nature of the assault likely to afflict them, is unclear. Earlier when faced with the insistence of the angels to stay over and thus the obligation to host them, it was their well-being, rather than Lot's own honor, that appeared to be the main source of the latter's anxiety:

> When Our messengers came to Lot he was anguished for them (*sīʾa bihim*) and felt for them great discomfort (*wa-ḍāqa bihim dharʿan*) and said: This is a distressful day! (Q 11:77)

When the confrontation—or the impending gang rape—draws close, it would appear as if Lot's deep personal humiliation heightens, and in both Q 11:78 and Q 15:71 it seems that personal humiliation was a motive—arguably the primary one—for Lot's offer:

> And his people came rushing unto him; for aforetime, they did evil deeds. He said: "Oh my people! These are my daughters—they are purer (*aṭhar*) for you, so guard yourselves against God and do not disgrace me with/in front of/in

muqāranah [Lot's Offer of His Daughters to his People in the Torah and the Qurʾan: A Comparative Study]," *JQS* 18 (2016): 161–224; 19 (2017): 160–210.

31. Whether these are separate crimes or are all intertwined with the single one of *ityān al-rijāl*, approaching men with lust (*fāhishatan*) rather than women, has in the last fifteen years become a major concern for Muslims seeking some form of Islamic justification for homosexuality or at least for the idea that same-sex sexual activity is not as monstrous a crime as that for which the people of Lot were destroyed. If viewed as separate crimes then the case can be made that they were punished for other crimes as part of a broader violation of the ethics required in dealing with people in general and, more specifically, with strangers. See Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*; Jamal, "Story of Lot"; and Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif, *Islamic Law and Muslim Same-Sex Unions* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

> the matter of my guests (*lā tukhzūnī fī ḍayfī*). Is there not among you a single righteous man (*rajulun rashīd*)?" (Q 11:78)

> Lot said: "Do not disgrace me. Fear God and do not shame me." They said: "Did we not forbid you from speaking on behalf of the worlds." He said: "These are my daughters if you must do something (*in kuntum fāʿilīn*)." (Q 15:69–71)

As Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966 CE) explains, Lot was troubled on account of "knowing what scandal awaited him in front of his guests, and what ill-treatment awaited these guests from his own people,"[32] and according to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), one of the earliest *mufassirūn*, it was "out of shame" that Lot exclaimed: "This is a distressful day" (Q 11:77).[33]

The question of what really caused Lot's anguish has not received significant attention from any of the commentators, classical or contemporary. From the Qurʾān, the two motivations for his anger and distress, the plight of his guests on the one hand and his personal humiliation on the other, appear seamlessly interwoven. Given the milieu wherein the story reportedly unfolded, this lack of distinction is, of course, plausible.

Other notions that the prophets are, by the very nature of their calling, expected to be beyond being mere children of their histories, do raise the question of Lot's willingness to sacrifice the dignity of his own daughters—or that of other women of this town, as many exegetes would interpret—at the altar of saving face.

The mob responds by accusing Lot of self-righteousness, threatens to drive him out of the town, and rejects his offer as inconsequential:

> You already know that we have no right (interest in) your daughters. In fact, you know exactly what we want (Q 11:79).

The *Mufassirūn* on Lot's Offer

Of all the classical and contemporary *tafsīr* works that I have perused for commentary on Lot's offer, none raised any question of whether Lot behaved

32. Sayyid Qutb, *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1967), 603.

33. Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 2.126. Muqātil b. Sulaymān was a second/eighth-century *mufassir* with a rather challenged pedigree. Because of the absence of *isnād*s in his work he is regarded by some as more of a qurʾānic storyteller than a serious *mufassir*.

ethically.[34] Every single *tafsīr*, including the recently published *Study Quran*,[35] as well as the Muslim-authored two-part scholarly article I located that deals with Lot's offer,[36] proceeds from the assumption that the most significant issue is the legal appropriateness of sex between the mob or members of the mob and his daughters. Lot's authority to offer "his daughters" is accepted, the character of a frenzied crowd hell-bent on assaulting strangers is ignored, and the question of rape as a violent crime of power rather than one of sexual passion is an understandably alien one.

Waleed Ahmed argues that "even through a cursory reading, it is quite clear that this verse, on its own, does not convey definite meaning; it does not explain what Lot meant when he offered his daughters to the Sodomites, i.e., the nature of his offer. On the textual level, the narrative before and after this verse does not either," and cites al-Samīn al-Ḥalābī (d. 756/1355) who in his *Al-Durr al-maṣūn fī ʿulūm al-kitāb al-maknūn* "insisted that it is imperative to supplement the verse with an additional element in order for it to convey definite meaning (*lā budda min shayʾin makhdhūf tatimmu bihi al-fāʾidah*)."[37] I would suggest that the nature of the offer is evident, although there is space to further enquire about its details. The mob came with the intention to rape Lot's guests and this intention to have sex with them was an indispensable element—although only one element amongst several—in their rushing to his house. Lot's offer is clearly in response to this element. It was the legal-theological need to frame Lot's response in a manner consistent with then-prevailing expectations (or "the Islamic moral code" as Waleed Ahmed expresses it)[38] that a prophet could only have conceivably offered his daughters—whatever is meant by daughters—to have sex in a legitimate relationship (i.e. marriage) that shaped this argument.

Two significant positions are discernable from the *tafsīr* literature. The dominant position is that Lot offered "his daughters in marriage," with

34. For the purposes of this presentation I have looked at a wide range of *tafāsir*, spanning from the earliest extant ones attributed to Muqātil b. Sulaymān and ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/826) to the more contemporary ones by Sayyid Qutb and Abū'l-Aʿlā al-Mawdūdī, and even the more recent *Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015). The general interpretation of the narrative has remained consistent and there was no particular or significant divergence in terms of period or sectarian predispositions, nor according to the traditional genres of *tafsīr* such as *tafsīr bi'l-maʾthūr*, *tafsīr bi'l-raʾy*, or *tafsīr bi'l-ishārah* such as might necessitate a closer examination of argument patterns.

35. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

36. See above, n. 31.

37. Ahmed, "Lot's Daughters," 415.

38. Ibid., 418.

significant arguments as to the meaning of "daughters," that is, whether it refers to his own daughters or more generally to the women of his community.[39] While ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/826) offers a rather terse comment that "Lot commanded them to marry women,"[40] other exegetes proceed with lengthy discussions on whether he offered his own daughters in marriage to two of the leading figures of the mob (*ruʾasāʾahum*) or whether he meant the unmarried women of his people.

The opinion that he intended his own daughters is attributed to ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Abū Muḥammad Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 203/818) and Abūʾl-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058). Among modern *mufassirūn*, Sayyid Qutb also holds this opinion:

> When Lot looked at his people coming hurriedly towards his home, intent on abusing him and his guests, he tried to arouse their upright nature and direct them to the opposite sex with whom healthy nature finds pleasure. He was even ready to give his daughters in marriage to those frenzied people to satisfy their maddening desires in a clean, pure way. *He said: "My people! Here are my daughters: they are purer for you. Have fear of God and do not disgrace me by wronging my guests. Is there not one right-minded man among you?"* All the connotations of purity, psychological and physical, are meant here. Lot's daughters would provide a proper, sound, and natural way for the satisfaction of the sexual desire, arousing healthy feelings as well. It is a situation of complete purity, natural as well as moral and religious. Moreover, they are physically purer. The will of the Creator has provided a clean, pure place for the new emerging life.[41]

The alternative variation of the marriage option is that by saying "my daughters," Lot intended the women of the town "because a prophet is like a father unto his people" (*al-nabī liʾl-ummah bi-manzilat al-wālid*), and to this end the exegetes invoked Q Aḥzāb 33:6: "The Prophet is closer to the believers than their selves, and his wives are [as] their mothers."[42] Al-Qurṭubī

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39. There are no *ḥadīth*s directly attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad commenting on this. As for the Companions, opinions are attributed to Hudhayfah b. al-Yamān and Ibn ʿAbbās. Ibn al-Yamān's opinion, "he [Lot] offered his daughters in marriage to them in the hope that his guests would be spared," has been rejected because of its weak and disrupted *sanad* (chain of narrators). As for Ibn ʿAbbās, several contradictory narrations are attributed to him, all rejected on the same grounds as that of Ibn al-Yamān. Al-Dawsarī, "*Taqdīm Lūṭ*," *JQS* 19 (2017): 195.

40. ʿAbd al-Razzāq b. Hishām al-Ṣanʿānī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān liʾl-Imām ʿAbd al-Razzāq b. Hishām al-Ṣanʿāni*, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad (3 vols.; Riyadh: Dār al-Kutub, 1989), 2.289.

41. Qutb, *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān*, 603.

42. Translation from Pickthall. Ahmed, "Lot's Daughters," 422, explains: "By relying on an unofficial reading of this verse attributed to ʿAbdullah ibn Masʿūd (d.

attributes this view to two *tābiʿī* authorities, Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722) and Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 95/712), while Abū'l-Fidāʾ Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) ascribes it to Qatādah b. al-Nuʿmān (d. 23/643) and others (*ghayr wāhid*).[43]

While the marriage option is the most widely accepted amongst the *mufassirūn*, from a contemporary perspective it is difficult to imagine how any person with some compassion—let alone a messenger of God—would offer his daughters to spend the rest of their lives with the ilk of anyone who formed a part of this mob.

The second view argues that the offer was not a serious one at all, neither in relation to his own daughters nor to the women of his people, but simply a ruse intended to deflect the attention of the mob or shame them. Al-Qurṭubī attributes this opinion to Abū ʿUbaydah Maʿmar b. al-Muthannā (d. 207/822), Abū ʿAbd Allāh ʿIkrimah b. ʿAbd Allāh (d. 105/723, a student and client of ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās), and a group (*ṭāʾifah*) of the earlier *mufassirūn*. Lot's hope was that the Sodomites would leave, so he never intended to act on his offer (*kāna'l-kalām mudāfaʿatan wa-lam yurid imḍāʿahu*) but only to offer it "as a way of shaming the Sodomites; something akin to saying to a thief—'eating swine is more lawful to you than doing this.'"[44] Waleed Ahmed also suggests that this opinion was an earlier one in a period before the doctrine of *ʿiṣmah* was formalized, thus allowing space for the idea that Lot "was being intentionally misleading."[45]

We can appreciate Lot's offer as a tactic—only hinted at by some of the *mufassirūn*—to gain time, change the conversation, and interrupt the threatening atmosphere. We may even suggest that, confronted by an aggressive mob, he may have reacted to stop or at least to lower the levels of frenzy, something akin to what René Girard describes as "interrupting the mimetic circle of violence."[46] Here the effective or possible victim of violence reacts in a non-violent way to break the chain of violence in order to not reproduce or confirm the same violence. The text by itself, though, does not provide sufficient indication that this was Lot's intention.

32/652), which adds the phrase 'and he [i.e., the Prophet] is a father to them' after the phrase 'and his wives are (as) their mothers,' exegetes became convinced that 'my daughters' in verse 71 of *Al-Ḥijr* and verse 78 of *Hūd* should not be understood in a literal sense."

43. See Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ*, 5.68; Abū'l-Fidāʾ Ismaʿīl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr al-Buṣrawī, *Mukhtaṣar Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Ṣābūnī (3 vols.; Beirut: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 2005), 2.227.

44. Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ*, 5.68.

45. Ahmed, "Lot's Daughters," 423.

46. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 11.

Reflections on the *Tafāsir* of "Here Are My Daughters"

None of the *mufassirūn* offer a plausible explanation of Lot's offer of his featureless daughters and the Sodomites' response to it. I agree with Waleed Ahmed that they all "contrive more story elements to explain this response or deviate significantly from its apparent meaning."[47] They all proceed from the assumption that the major question is one of sex inside or outside of marriage with no regard to the violent character of the mob and their violation of one of the highest values of all traditional societies, respect for the stranger and guest.

I am cognizant that the ethical horizons of the exegetes and the gender roles in their societies were rather different from the ones wherein we find ourselves. The Qurʾān itself, though—despite the traditional Islamic legal framework that defines marriage as a contract providing access to a woman's pudenda—emphasizes the dimension of lovingkindness in the marital relationship:

> And among his wonders is this: he creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and he engenders love and tenderness between you; in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think. (Q Rūm 30:21)[48]

At this point I want to consider a few other possibilities not raised in the *tafāsīr* dealing with Lot's offer.[49]

First, it may be argued that Lot's offer could be considered as a discourse of panic and survival and that, in this case, it is better to lie than to die; a typical case of *taqiyyah* where preserving life is a priority over telling the truth (Q ʿImrān 3:28). This may be compared to the *ḥadīth* account of Abraham telling Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister rather than his wife,[50] or to the 'blasphemy' of ʿAmmār b. Yāsir under torture, when the Prophet told him: "if they turn [to torture you], turn [to do it]" (i.e., "insult me again if necessary, I am interested in your life more than my 'honor'"). The difficulty with this argument is that the text does not at any stage suggest that Lot's

47. Ahmed, "Lot's Daughters," 421.

48. Translation from Muhammad Asad.

49. I am indebted to Dr. Adnane Mokrani from the Pontifical Institute of Islamic Studies, Rome, for engaging with me on these points of reflection.

50. This account is narrated by Abū Hurayrah and contained in Abū'l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. ʿAlī Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's *Fatḥ al-bārī fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (13 vols.; Beirut: Dār Rayān li'l-Turāth, 1986), no. 3179, where Abraham is reported to have "lied only three times." A fuller account is contained in Gen 12:10–18, 17:17, and 20:1–8.

life was in physical danger. What was at stake was the physical welfare of his guests and, possibly, his daughters. It is well-nigh impossible to imagine the mob described in the Qur'ān as being people capable of compassion towards any person—including their own wives.

Second, the offer of Lot may be viewed as a form of self-sacrifice; he preferred to 'sacrifice' his daughters, part of his being and family, rather than his guests, the strangers. The strangers, in this case, are strangely more protected than the family's members, practically Lot's unique believers' community, seemingly the only success that he had in his failed mission. What does it mean in his scale of values and priorities? In the Arab mentality of that time, this attitude was, in fact, laudable. The reference to the son as the symbol of self, and the sacrifice of the son as self-sacrifice, is evident in the story of Abraham and his son—a story that the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition present as the peak of submission to the will of God. The son's acceptance to be sacrificed is explicit in the Qur'ān (Q Ṣaffāt 37:102) but absent in the Bible. Is there, in fact, an unstated willingness to be sacrificed on the part of Lot's daughters? One can, after all, imagine a certain kind of deep affinity between them, being the sole followers of their father.

Supposing for a moment that the mob was also physically threatening to Lot, the question then arises about why he was willing to offer someone else's life or lives in order to ransom his own? In that historical milieu, it is understandable that he would be willing to offer his daughters in order to save his honor because children—particularly daughters—were regarded as extensions of their parents and parents extensions of larger family units. Sacrificing his daughters could be viewed as a form of self-sacrifice. There is, however, a difference between Abraham's willingness to engage in 'self'-sacrifice and Lot's—at least for the believer in God. Abraham's was in regard to a command from God—not an act of preservation for his own honor.

Third, Lot's offer may be viewed as a form of commitment to non-violence, calling to mind the teaching of Jesus: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles" (Matt 5:38–41). In a similar spirit, in the story of the two sons of Adam, Cain and Abel, especially in its qur'ānic version, the victim chooses non-violence: "If you extend your hand to kill me, I will not extend my hand to kill you; for I fear God, Lord of the worlds" (Q Mā'idah 5:28). And in the story of the Queen of Sheba, when she sent gifts to Solomon as an answer to his threatening letter, "She said: 'When kings enter a city, they devastate it, and subjugate its dignified people. Thus they

always do. I am sending them a gift, and will see what the envoys bring back'" (Q Naml 27:34–35).[51]

I acknowledge that I am the child of a highly individualized era. While I can appreciate the willingness to forego one's own right to self-defense, it is difficult for me to appreciate sacrificing what I cannot but see as 'another' to a violent mob in order to privilege my non-violence. I am deeply conscious of not succumbing to what the British historian, E. P. Thompson, described as "the enormous condescension of posterity."[52] Here in Lot's offer of his daughter, however, we have to deal with a seemingly impossible set of hermeneutical acrobatics to arrive at the conclusion that, in view of all human beings being endowed with an inherent dignity, a messenger of God not only failed to uphold this view, but acted contrarily to it. It may be argued that in the particular context of late antique Mesopotamia and its surroundings, the major ethical imperative for Lot would have been to preserve codes of hospitality, and that this may have taken precedence over the need to protect his daughters. While a general pattern of unkindness is cited by a number of exegetes in enumerating the crimes of the people of Lot, the obligation to hospitality is never contrasted with the obligation to protect his daughters.

The question then arises, "What were his options?" Well, the question itself assumes that he was constrained by the anxieties of ordinary human beings.[53] And human beings are, well, human. The ancient Mu'tazili objection to assigning the Qur'ān—one of the ways in which the Transcendent communicated with humankind—the status of being eternal (*qadīm*) as a type of *shirk* (association with God) is, I would suggest, equally applicable to the messengers of God.

The Mother, the Book, and the Desperation to Fit In

I earlier referenced my late mother (may the Transcendent bless her soul) and how her life and death have impacted what drives my obsession in looking out for the least—in this case, Lot's daughters. Let me now narrate a story that may serve to illustrate some of the complications of negotiating an idealized text in a non-ideal world with definite ideas of what the ideal is, and in the process address the question of the *shirk* of bibliolatry.

When we were small, and until she died when I was thirteen years old, my brother and I shared a room with my mother while my four older male

51. Translations from Talal Itani.

52. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), 12.

53. I was intrigued by the fact that in none of the descriptions of this confrontation is there any indication of Lot's invoking God's succor in this terrifying moment.

siblings shared the other bedroom. We changed clothes in the bathroom and my mother in our bedroom, always asking us to turn away and close our eyes, which we always dutifully did. Occasionally, though, she required our intervention in getting dressed and we assisted in the awkward task of doing so, trying to keep our eyes closed.

Well, my mother was—to put it bluntly—obese. At that time, and continuing until today among my people, we use the word "fat"—but my story is told in a particular time and place. And who knows—with Trump now in place, "fat" may become an "in" word once again (*Allāh yarḥamukum wa-yarḥamunā*). When dressing for "an occasion" she wore a corset, which in those years were exceptionally unwieldy contraptions with flexible metal bands on the edges to assist in holding in the "unseemly" extra bodily mass. The corset needed to be zipped up on one side, a task that she sometimes found difficult to accomplish on her own. This is where my brother and I came to the rescue. I am now unsure—or don't want to remember or reveal—if we always kept our eyes closed. The hilarity of the moment and our at times uncontrollable laughter did not assist.

By the time she stepped into the outside world she had lost a remarkable few inches around her not insubstantial waist and below. That there was more to my mother physically than meets the eye was known to her friends and relatives, but of course this was politely passed over in silence. Her really close friends would offer advice on slimming aids and what the latest-in-corset-wear could offer to make her life in them a bit more comfortable.

In some ways 'an occasion' is invariably a performance, and the audience has certain expectations of what a worthy performer looks like, what kind of physique conforms to those expectations of beauty and presentability. There was no critique of these expectations and they were presumed to be universal. How they were constructed and by whom were not questions that anyone raised.

While the body—particularly the bodies of women—is still pretty much expected to yield and be reined in to the demands of the world, that world—with its demands and how it is constructed to serve patriarchy and capital—is now receiving increasing scrutiny from activists and scholars, particularly in the fields of social theory, feminism, and decoloniality. The assumptions of 'universal rights' and 'objective scholarship' are no longer getting the free ride that they used to. I welcome these developments, and in my more recent work this forms a significant part of my own critique of liberal apologetic Muslim responses to questions of the Qur'ān and gender justice, sexual orientation, and non-violence.

I wonder if attempts by liberal theologians, feminists, and queer scholars to read into the Qur'ān a more positive response to these questions are akin to the hand that my brother and I lent to my mother to make her appear more

acceptable to an unexamined ideal of beauty? It was, after all, also about our comfort and our embarrassment. We didn't want to have a "fat mother," at least not in public!

I am not only a critical lover of the Qur'ān, but I also identify as an engaged Muslim liberation theologian. What this means for me, as I have outlined in a number of my works, is that I affirm the preferential option for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, and those who experience the undersides of history and live in its shadows. While this commitment to a preferential option for the oppressed is, in a sense, metaphysical and trans-historical at the level of my hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān, it is simultaneously situated in the geo- and body politics of the here and now.[54] In the same way that I yield to the urge to investigate the question of Lot's daughters being offered—even if as wives—to a mob of would-be rapists, a question that seems to have gone unnoticed for centuries among Muslim scholars of the Qur'ān, I also have the responsibility to know when, how, and where this investigation takes place in my own community's current socio-political context. I thus need to figure out a way of approaching the text through a multi-layered hermeneutics of historical-critical scholarship, employing faith as well as suspicion—whether dealing with the text of my "fat" mother, the "awkward" verses of Qur'ān or even my own wretched *nafs* (ego).

Given that we live in a world that continues to be defined by the socio-political, ideological and scholarly imperatives of the West over the Rest (which includes the West inside the Rest, even if the Rest wasn't perfect to begin with!), I prioritize a provincializing of Eurocentric paradigms as my primary initiative in approaching a text. As someone who is based in community in the global south, and cares for the sensitivities, urgencies, and limits of messy human communities, I do not find myself sharing the same liberal urge—or at least not to the same extent—that many other self-declared progressive and reformist feminist and queer Muslim scholars have in making their critique of the community's ills their primary concern.

Internal critique is a *sine qua non* of both critical scholarship and of an ethical existence, whether directed at the corset of my mother or the verses of the Qur'ān that vex me. This internal critique however, as I said, must be accompanied by a keen awareness of the time, place, and manner in which it takes place.

Against homogenizing all critiques as the same within the framework of "multiple critiques," I want to propose that the procession of critiques

54. Cf. Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality," *Transmodernity*: *Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1 (2011): 1–36.

must be layered. Certain critiques must be privileged over others.[55] In the context of my mother, I must always assert that the triple daggers of apartheid, capitalism, and patriarchy are what broke her, and many other black women living under the white apartheid regime in South Africa. These are the forces which propelled my mother to an unhealthy obesity and her household to poverty, and which placed white standards of beauty so deeply into her colored former-slave bones that she imagined a corset would solve the problem of making her look less fat, less poor, and less black.

In this context, I must affirm and protect my mother firstly, not through a hermeneutics of suspicion, but a hermeneutics of undying faith and radical love. In my love for her I will do my best to cover up the bruises from unhealthy eating, being overworked at the factory, or unfortunately, the beatings—and worse—of men who preyed upon her in the fields as she walked to and from work.

Only after being there for my mother and allowing her the space to know she is loved, and can and should love herself for who she is, do I begin to ascertain other critiques or concerns. On a sunny day when she seems receptive to new beginnings, I would walk over to her and say, "*Ummī*, you know eating a big meal after *maghrib* (the evening prayers) is not healthy for you, right?" or "*Ummī*, you look so nice and beautiful in that free-flowing dress, why do you feel the need to wear that constrictive corset whenever you want to dress up?" These questions come from a place of faith and love, even if I am being critical and suspicious towards the life-text that meets the eye. They also come second, third, or sometimes not at all, depending on how bad the man has been treating my mother at home or at work.

I approach the Qurʾān in the same manner. Firstly, I am a lover with a deep yet critical faith in and attachment to the Word of God. When dealing with the racial capitalism of Dutch slavery that brought my ancestors to the shores of the Cape, the anti-black racism which permeated apartheid, or the Islamophobia of the War on Terror age, my first and primary critique is not with respect to the Book. My primary concern is defending and upholding the human dignity of myself and my community as we wade through the tests

55. Houria Bouteldja, a French-Algerian Muslim woman thinker and activist, makes a similar point in critiquing liberal feminist approaches to intersectionality that collapse all forms of oppressions as being the same. For Houria, and I agree, race predetermines all other forms of oppression, whether gender, sex, or other. Race is the baseline of solidarity, and from that standing-up an intersectional web can flow according to the needs of a particular community. See Houria Bouteldja, "Race, Class and Gender: A New Three-Headed Divinity" (paper presented at the seventh International Congress for Feminist Research in the Francophone World, Montreal, 26 August 2015), http://indigenes-republique.fr/race-class-and-gender-a-new-three-headed-divinity/.

and constant battles against systems that want to either destroy us totally or make us 'good Muslims' who are Westoxicated, battling to fit in and find a seat at the side table of the Master. (In this respect, at least, Lot was a prophet like all others—never asking "How do I fit in with the powerful?" but—however clumsily to the contemporary eye—seeking to resist the dominant form of injustice.)

The urge, value, and urgency to produce theoretical knowledge is valid in the context of critical scholarship and academic reflection. The awkwardness I encounter while reading the Lot verses is equally valid. However, for those of us who work within a particular community and in the context of multiple layers of experience—of being poor, marginalized, and in the shadows—we have a responsibility to show an awareness towards the problem of knowledge production in understanding the context and experience of the margins. The insensitive imposition of abstract theory and knowledge on communities, whether this knowledge is coming from academia or elsewhere, needs to be challenged.

We often end up imposing dominating universals and values on communities in the supposedly innocent name of advancing knowledge production and academic practice. My own scholarly approach to the Qur'ān, and specifically the Lot verses, is at variance to such an approach.[56] Given the dominance of Western epistemological hierarchies, which discipline classical Muslim approaches to the Qur'ān, there is a need to endorse rigorous scholarly commitment while at the same time resisting the practical use or abuse of it by powerful states or elites in academia.

Only after I center this prerogative, which for me is demonstrated through a hermeneutical principle that demands a preferential option for the oppressed, can I proceed to challenge my beloved mother. In the same way, the awkward verses of the Qur'ān can trouble me, but never as much as the larger systemic powers—economic and ideological, even when sheathed in the garments of religion or the language of peace and harmony—that are at the heart of so much pain in the Muslim world. My intellectual urgencies and my questions are driven by the war on humanity by these forces—a war that often drives my people deeper into defensive laagers and apologetics about our own awkward texts, and then pours further scorn on us for our inability to be critical of our tradition and sacred texts.

There was more to my mother than meets the eye, literally and figuratively. Much later I came to appreciate that while she lived for us, she also performed for a powerful industry that shaped the eyes of a world that placed her under observation. That world was not innocent. It was driven by economic and

56. For more details, see my *Qur'ān, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).

ideological imperatives. Yet despite our awareness that there was more to her than meets the eye, for my brothers and I, my mother was more than the sum total of her physical self. She lived and died for us. Nothing will diminish our love for her—not the nearly five decades that have passed since she left us, nor the hilarity of two kids with their eyes closed struggling to ready their mother for the gaze of a temporal world.

And during my inconsolable bereavement at the loss of my mother, I need to be reminded, as the first believers were when many refused to believe that Muḥammad was no more, that only the Transcendent survives.

I may be a lover of the Book, but I was never required to worship it.

And I now know that my mother was not the only person struggling to fit in, that others face similar struggles of contortion.

JIQSA 2 (2017): 35–46

RESPONSE TO FARID ESACK'S 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

SHARI L. LOWIN

Abstract

Prof. Esack, in his IQSA presidential address, discusses his discomfort with the qur'ānic depiction of Lot as a righteous prophet of God who offers his daughters up for sexual assault in order to save his male guests from sexual assault. He writes that he is further bothered by the attempt on the part of Islamic exegetes to whitewash Lot's actions and maintain his righteousness. In this reply, I look to pre-Islamic midrashic sources for comparison and then engage in a close rereading of the qur'ānic accounts. In so doing, I show that the Qur'ān appears to present two different Lots, one a righteous messenger of God and one a flawed townsman, on the biblical and midrashic model. Since Prof. Esack noted in his talk that he turned to scholarship on biblical materials with little success, I then turn to a discussion of Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* and its use by modern scholars of Islam. The response ends with a call for scholars of the Qur'ān to partner with scholars who have familiarity with and skill in reading the scriptural and exegetical materials of other religions.

Keywords

Lot, Midrash, Ginzberg

Introduction

At the beginning of his IQSA presidential address, Prof. Esack observes that we are meeting here at the International Qur'anic Studies Association shortly after the Americans among us have elected a new president.[1] I know that in many countries, from which some members of IQSA and AAR/SBL may hail, legal democratic elections are still the stuff of dreams and aspirations.

1. The present response paper engages the original abstract and oral presentation of Prof. Esack's presidential address, delivered on November 18, 2016 in San Antonio, Texas, USA. The author did not have access to subsequent modifications by Esack prior to press, so those modifications could not be addressed here.

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441/jiqsa.2.2017.a003

Here in the United States, our legal democratic elections are an element of our government of which we have been fiercely proud. Yet it is no secret to the world that the results of our elections this cycle trouble many of us, deeply and in ways that people all across America's political spectrum have not been troubled in past elections. I stand among the troubled. Of all of the varied identities I hold, each of which alone makes me score fairly high on the reasons-to-be-troubled checklist, it is as an American, one who believes in the Musketeer Theory of America ("all for one and one for all"), that I am most concerned by Tuesday's events and by events that continue to unfold.

I debated whether or not to mention politics at all today. After all, IQSA is not a political organization. Unlike MESA, IQSA does not engage the study of politics, and certainly not American politics, and no one has come here today to hear about *my* politics. We are here because of scholarly interest in, dedication to, and—for many of us—love of the study of scripture, and the Islamic scripture in particular, whether or not we are Muslim.

Yet it is not as a student of the Qurʾān and Islam, but as an American at this political juncture, that Prof. Esack's choice of topic and the questions he poses about it—as expressed in his presentation abstract—resonate so deeply with me. What are we supposed to do, he asks, when we encounter ethically challenging elements in something that we deeply love and cherish? How do we negotiate these elements, and what are the limitations of these negotiations? These are questions many Americans have been wrestling with for the past week and a half, and will continue to wrestle with in the coming months and years. I thank Prof. Esack for challenging us to grapple with that which disturbs us, rather than, as I suspect some of us might want, to stick our fingers in our ears and bury our heads in the sand.

Prof. Esack writes that as a believing Muslim studying his beloved Qurʾān, this question—how do I deal with that with which my conscience prevents me from making my peace—rings particularly loudly when he considers the qurʾānic account of Lot and his daughters. And so it is to Lot and his daughters that I now turn.

The Story of Lot

What so disturbs Prof. Esack in the qurʾānic account of Lot, he explains, is not simply that it presents us with a man who offers up his daughters to what appears to be a gang rape in order to derail a sexual assault on his male guests. That would be a disturbing enough storyline on its own. What cranks up the level of distress for Prof. Esack is that the man who does so is a prophet, and as such he is understood to be unerringly righteous, endowed with *ʿiṣmah*. Yet Lot's behavior, his seeming to give no thought to the objectification, depersonalization, and victimization of his own daughters,

ranks as stunningly unrighteous. What is more, the Qur'ān seems to have nothing critical to say about it.

As Prof. Esack indicates, classical Muslim scholarship—the *tafsīr* literature—has attempted to mitigate Lot's disturbing moral choice, resulting in two categories of response. In the dominant position, the *mufassirūn* (exegetes) claim that Lot's offer of his daughters to the mob was intended as an offer of marriage, not rape. Different exegetes present different explanations of what exactly Lot meant by this, with some claiming that he meant to offer his unmarried daughters to unspecified persons, and others that he offered these daughters in marriage to leaders of the mob in particular. Yet others explain that Lot meant not to offer his own daughters specifically but, as a prophet who plays a fatherly role among his people, he was using familial language to encourage the men generally to refrain from sexual intercourse with other men and to return to marrying their own women. The other position found in classical scholarship maintains that Lot never intended to offer any women in marriage to the mob. Rather, Lot was simply trying to distract them from their bad impulses and/or shame them into good behavior.[2] None of these explanations, claims Prof. Esack, are wholly believable or sufficient.

Lot in the Bible

Prof. Esack mentions in his address that while investigating the qur'ānic account he turned to scholarship on the biblical version of this narrative for possible insights. As he notes, biblical scholarship can serve as "an indispensable tool akin to *ḥadīth* for *tafsīr*." However, since much of the biblical scholarship on Lot appears to focus on an interaction between Lot and his daughters that is absent from the Qur'ān, he has found this to be an unproductive path.

For those unfamiliar with the part of the biblical account for which there is no parallel in the qur'ānic text, allow me to recount it quickly. According to Genesis 19, when the destruction of Sodom commences, the angels who had been sent by God (see v. 13) lead Lot, his wife, and his two unmarried daughters out of the city and command them to run for the hills, literally (v. 17). Panicked that he will not be able to outrun the destruction, Lot asks if he could instead take refuge in a smallish city nearby. God—or one of the angels channeling God—accedes to this request and, on account of Lot who will now reside there, spares this city from its intended annihilation (vv. 21–22). However, with destruction continuing to rain down on the rest of

2. These exegetical explanations are discussed both in Esack's paper and in Waleed Ahmed, "Lot's Daughters in the Qur'ān: An Investigation through the Lens of Intertextuality," in Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its Historical Context 2* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 411–424.

the surrounding cities of the plain, Lot grows afraid to remain even in this city (now known as Tsôʿar) (v. 22), perhaps suspecting that its salvation is not secure (v. 30). So he leaves, runs to the mountains with his daughters as the angels had originally instructed (his wife having already become a pillar of salt) (v. 26), and together the three take refuge in a mountain cave. The daughters, the very ones he had offered up at home to be gang-raped (vv. 7–8), look around and apparently conclude that humanity is being wiped out (v. 31).[3] Seeing their father as their only option for procreation, they agree to lull him into a stupor with wine and then bed him, one daughter per night, one night each. The plan works, and both daughters become pregnant. The elder gives birth to a son named Moab (a play on words, "from father" [*me-av*]), the progenitor of the Moabites. The younger gives birth to a son named Ben-ʿAmmi ("son of my nation," again a play on words), the progenitor of the Ammonites.

Prof. Esack wrote in his presentation abstract, "Given the very different understanding of prophets in the Qurʾān amplified by the doctrine of *ʿiṣmah*, Muslim scholarship finds the biblical account of Lot's rape by his daughters—all of this while he was in a deep state of intoxication—unspeakably blaspheming and one of the more horrific examples of precisely why one of the Qurʾān's functions is to act as corrective of previous scriptures." I will not disagree that Muslim scholarship does in fact view this biblical account through such a lens. However, I would like to compare this view with a few other views of this same episode expressed in pre-Islamic classical rabbinic scholarship.

3. This appears to be the plain meaning of their words, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father" (vv. 31–32). While most of the medieval exegetes accepted this explanation as an honest statement, some questioned the daughters' motives, noting that the elder uses too many words to get her point across. She could simply have stated, "There are no more men left other than our father; let us preserve offspring through him." Instead, she adds two strangely extraneous phrases, "to come in to us after the manner of all the world." Some exegetes therefore posited that the daughters did not actually suspect the world was ending; after all, the city of Tsôʿar had just been saved on their behalf. Rather, the daughters felt that no men *worthy of them* were left. R. David Qimḥi (also known as Radaq, d. 1235) cites the explanation of Rabbi Joseph Kara (d. 1135), which flips that arrogance on its head. The daughters knew that some men had survived (in Tsôʿar), he writes, but thought that none would ever want to marry them and sire children with them, given their association with Sodom, the city that wrought devastation upon them. See *Perûsh Radaq ʿal ha-Tôrah*, ed. Abraham Ginsburg (Pressburg, 5602 [1842]), on Gen 19:31.

Lot in Pre-Islamic Midrash

Interestingly, not only do the early rabbinic sources not whitewash Lot's behavior, the classical rabbinic sources *expand* upon his badness. They do this by starting with the middle of the three segments that make up the Lot narrative in Genesis—his offer of his daughters to be gang-raped—and extend his problematic behavior to what precedes and follows, like a balloon blown up from the center.

We see this in one of the earlier of the classical sources, the circa-fifth- to seventh-century *Midrash Tanḥuma*.[4] The *Tanḥuma* does not accept the reason that Lot himself tenders for his abhorrent offer of his daughters to be gang-raped, which is, famously, that he is trying to prevent the townspeople from molesting his male guests ("Behold, I have two daughters who have never known a man, I will bring them out to you and you do to them as is good in your eyes; as for these men, do nothing, for they have come under the shade of my roof [i.e. my protection]") (Gen 19:8). The *Tanḥuma* sees the true explanation for his bizarre offer in the Bible's earlier description of how Lot arrived at Sodom in the first place. In the Bible, Lot is not sent to Sodom by God, as the Qur'ān maintains.[5] Rather, Genesis 13 reports that Lot's shepherds and Abraham's shepherds had been skirmishing over grazing land (v. 7). Eventually, the two agree to move apart from one another so as to avoid further conflict. Abraham says to his nephew, "Behold the whole land is open before you. Separate, please, from me. If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I will go to the left" (v. 9). Genesis 13:10–11 relates that Lot then looked at the fertile plains of the Jordan and saw them as akin to the Garden of Eden. So, he settled there, erecting his tents right up against the city of Sodom (v. 12).

According to *Midrash Tanḥuma*, this was not an innocent choice of residence nor one based on purely economic reasons. The *Tanḥuma* notices that in the verse immediately following the report that Lot sets his tents right up against Sodom, the Bible records a seemingly neutral, but in hindsight quite ominous, comment. Genesis 13:13 says, "And the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the Lord, exceedingly." The proximity of these two verses, maintains *Tanḥuma*, teaches us that what Lot saw when he looked at Sodom (v. 10) was not just good grazing land. Rather, he saw that the men of Sodom

4. On the complexity of dating the *Tanḥuma*, see Hermann L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 302–306, and more recently, Anat Reizel, *Mavô la-Midrashîm* (Alon Shevut: Hôtsa'at Tevûnôt-Mikhlelet Hertsôg, 5761 [2010]), 234-237.

5. The most blatant statement of Lot being divinely sent (*min al-mursalīn*) occurs in Q 37:133, though one may understand this from other verses as well.

were awash in sexual immorality (*Tanḥuma*'s word, *zîmah*, does not indicate homosexuality in particular). Lot chose to live near Sodom not despite but because of this, says *Tanḥuma*, and he did so in order to do as the Sodomites did. How do we know this, asks the midrash? Because, it answers, Lot offered his daughters up to violent strangers as sexual objects. The normal practice of the world is that a man gives himself up to be killed in order to save his daughters and his wife. He kills or is killed. But *this one*—*Tanḥuma* is too disgusted even to mention his name—*this one* handed over his daughters to be sexually tortured.[6]

In another fifth-century midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* (51.8–9), the second-century sage R. Elyehô-ʿeinai echoes *Midrash Tanḥuma*'s teaching that Lot's move to Sodom was caused by his licentious leanings. But R. Elyehô-ʿeinai ramps it up a notch. Lot, he says, lusted after his own daughters in particular. We know this, he teaches, from Proverbs 18:1. There the moralist writes, "*le-ta'avvah yevaqesh niphrad*," he who separates himself from the group does so because he seeks his own desire. So too when Lot separated himself from Abraham, we are to understand that Lot did so because he sought his own desire, meaning, really, Lot desired his own daughters. This teaching reflects the words of R. Naḥman bar Ḥanin, who earlier in *Genesis Rabbah* (41.6) said of Lot moving to Sodom: he who desires licentiousness will eventually allow himself to be fed from his own flesh, a clear reference to Lot's subsequent fathering of his own grandsons.[7]

In another tradition in this passage in *Genesis Rabbah*, R. Tanḥuma in the name of R. Samuel continues this idea, teaching that Lot was not a victim of his daughters' eventual seduction but a willing participant. The Bible relates, "And they made their father drink wine that night. And the first-born went in, and lay with her father; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose" (Gen 19:33). On its face it sounds as if Lot were so drunk, so passed out, that he had no idea that he was having sexual relations at all. However, notes R. Tanḥuma in R. Samuel's name, when the Bible relates the actions of the elder daughter, the first to take the plunge, a mark appears above the word "in her rising" (*û-bĕ-qûmâh*) in the authoritative Masoretic textual version. Since according to the rabbis nothing unnecessary appears in the Biblical text, such a seemingly extraneous marking requires interpretation. According to R. Tanḥuma in the name of

6. The word used here, *le-hit'ollel*, can mean to be raped or tortured. That rape is itself a type of torture is probably not an accidental linguistic connection. See *Midrash Tanḥûmâ ʿim Perûsh ʿEts Yôsef ve-ʿAnaf Yôsef* (Jerusalem: Levin-Epstein, 5628 [1867–1868]), *Vayyera'* 12.

7. *Bereshît Rabbah*, ed. Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1912).

R. Samuel, the unusual marking here, on this particular word, indicates that while Lot may not have known at the beginning of the night what was going on, he certainly knew by the end of the act, when his daughter stood up (*bĕ-qûmâh*) to leave. Yet not only did he do nothing about it, he did not prevent himself from drinking wine with his younger daughter the very next night. As we know from R. Naḥman bar Ḥanin earlier, a man who hungers for licentiousness eventually ends up feeding on his own.

What Are We to Make of This?

While such a negative portrayal of Abraham's nephew poses an enormous problem for the Islamic tradition, clearly this was not a concern in the pre-Islamic classical rabbinic texts. This should not prove surprising. Neither the Bible nor the rabbis understood the heroes of the Bible as perfectly righteous. Unlike in the Islamic tradition, the concept of *ʿiṣmah* does not play a role here. Rather, the Bible portrays its heroes as complex and wholly human characters, heroes who struggle with their human imperfections. Their value, their heroism, does not derive from their being infallible or protected from sin but from their proving ultimately successful in the free-will-fueled struggle against sin. And such a struggle is oftentimes imperfect.

But more importantly, even if the concept of *ʿiṣmah* did exist here, which it does not, one should understand that in the biblical-rabbinic tradition Lot would not be the recipient of such a quality. After all, Lot in the biblical-rabbinic tradition is *not*, to use an Islamic designation, a prophet.[8] Rather, Lot's importance rests in the fact that he is a nephew of Abraham, who *tries* to be good, and who *tries* to learn the lessons of morality and righteousness modeled by his uncle.[9] Ultimately, however, he does not live up to Abraham's model; indeed, it is not for nothing that the Bible never speaks of Lot again after his abysmal behavior in Genesis 19. Thus, the biblical account of Lot is *not* related in order for adherents to emulate him. In the Jewish tradition, the story of Lot in Sodom is *not* that of a prophet railing against homosexuality, nor does Jewish tradition employ the narrative to that end.[10] Rather, the three

8. Neither the Bible nor Jewish tradition uses the designation "prophet" for these early characters at all. They are instead understood as the forefathers (*avôt*).

9. See for example *Midrash Tanḥuma*, *Vayyera'* 11. There the midrash credits Lot with having learned from Abraham to be hospitable, a righteous characteristic at odds with Sodom's values.

10. Rabbinic texts instead accuse the Sodomites of all sorts of evil acts, all of them related to the perversion of justice, to violence, and to the oppression of the weak. For the rabbis, their homosexually charged gang-rape results from the Sodomites' desire to violate guests, the weak members of a society. The rabbis do not understand the

accounts that make up the Lot narrative—the move to Sodom, the offer of his daughters to a gang-rape, the incestuous relations with his daughters—form a narrative of warning for any who, while not themselves yet sinning or evil, fail to take caution against aligning themselves with those who are.

Lot in the Qur'ān

I realize that this foray into the midrashic realm does not solve the issue of the ethical awkwardness in the qur'ānic account, with which Prof. Esack is primarily concerned. In a sense, looking at the rabbinic treatment of Lot makes the qur'ānic motif of Lot offering up his daughters to the mob even more troubling. Understanding the daughter-offer motif as a part of the longer biblical narrative only emphasizes how much this storyline does not fit with the Qur'ān's teachings regarding Lot, his righteousness, and sexual morality.

In fact, rather than resolve the ethical awkwardness, I would like to make the appearance of this storyline in the Qur'ān even more problematic. As Prof. Esack and others have pointed out, while the Qur'ān speaks of Lot twenty-seven times, only seven of these go beyond brief mentions of Lot or his people in lists of like characters. In only two of these seven do the daughters appear, in Q Hūd 11:77–83 and Q Ḥijr 15:61–77. The Sūrah 15 version reads more like an outline of the story, with the details slightly more fleshed out in Sūrah 11, a rendition that closely mirrors that of the Bible.

Among the interesting and significant components of the Lot accounts in Sūrah 11 and Sūrah 15, a few key elements should be noted. In the first place, although Lot is understood in Muslim tradition as a prophet sent to preach against the sin of homosexuality, nowhere in either Sūrat Hūd or Sūrat al-Ḥijr does the text mention homosexuality outright—a silence shared by the biblical account. Q 11:78 states only that the people of Lot's city had "been in the habit of doing evil" (*kānū yaʿmalūna al-sayyiʾāt*); in the same verse, Lot argues that his daughters are "purer" (*hunna aṭhar*) for the townspeople, although what precisely that means is not clear. The townsmen's response in verse 79 does not clear up the matter, for they reply that Lot knows that they have no "right" (*ḥaqq*) to his daughters. In verse 80, Lot then asks not to be disgraced in front of his guests, which would indicate that the problem is not homosexuality but a violation of hospitality rules, an issue which both Jewish and Muslim exegetes raise. Similar ambiguities appear in Q 15. In verses 68–69, Lot again asks not to be shamed in front of his guests. They reply with the very unclear statement, "Did we not forbid you from the worlds" (*a-wa-*

act as fueled by a desire to "approach men with lust instead of women" (Q 7:81). See *Bereshît Rabbah* 49.6 and 50.7, and cf. *b. Sanh.* 109a–b.

lam nanhaka ʿan al-ʿālamīn) (v. 70). Lot then offers his daughters, stating equally unclearly, "These are my daughters, if you would do it" (v. 71).[11]

Even more significantly, as in the Bible, nowhere does either qur'ānic *sūrah* present Lot as a prophet, a preacher, a warner, or as sent by God in any way. While Sūrat Hūd does include the Lot narrative as the fifth of six accounts in which a man is sent by God to preach against his people, Lot stands out as different. In the other five cases—the accounts of Nūḥ (Noah), Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Shuʿayb and Mūsā (Moses)—we find that the Qur'ān uses the root *r-s-l* ("to send"). Regarding Nūḥ, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shuʿayb, God says He sent (*arsalnā*) each as a "warner" (*nadhīr*). In the case of Moses, God sent him with divine authority (*wa-laqad arsalnā Mūsā bi-āyātinā wa-sulṭānin mubīn*) (v. 96). All five "sent" men are then immediately portrayed as taking up the task of messengership, exhorting their charges to repent and warning them of the punishment that will befall them if they do not. But Lot never does this. The most he can muster—in both of the chapters that speak of his daughters—is to beg his townsfolk not to shame him by attacking his guests. He does not exhort nor does he warn. In fact, he sounds more like a man in despair.[12] Perhaps this behavior should not surprise us. After all, of the six cases mentioned in Sūrah 11, only Lot is not sent to the people. In both Sūrah 11 and Sūrah 15, he is among the people already when the action begins. Sūrah 11 does use the root *r-s-l* four times, either as a verb (*ursilnā*) or as a noun (*rusul*). Yet none of these four usages speak of Lot. All four occur in reference to the messengers sent *to* Lot by God (vv. 69, 70, 77, 81).

In other words, in the qur'ānic passages that recount Lot offering up his daughters, Lot is presented wholly differently than in the qur'ānic passages that do not include this detail. In the daughter-chapters Lot appears less as a prophet and more as a man struggling (and failing) to do the right thing. In fact, there seem to be two Lots at work in the Qur'ān: one, a righteous messenger sent by God to a city he is not from in order to preach against the sin of homosexuality, and the other, a hospitable townsman who offers up his daughters for a gang-rape for fear of being shamed in front of his guests. If this were an SBL session, we would speak of two authors, or two variant oral traditions.

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11. In the other qur'ānic renditions that do more than simply include Lot in a list of prophets or his people in a list of sinning peoples, Lot clearly and unambiguously preaches against his people for "approaching males" instead of females. In none of these, however, are the daughters mentioned. See Q Shuʿarāʾ 26:165–166, Naml 27:54, and ʿAnkabūt 29:28–29. Qur'ān translation from A. J. Droge (trans.), *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013).

12. In verse 77, he distressedly says "this is a hard day." See also vv. 78, 80.

When the traditional Muslim commentaries try to explain away Lot's offer of gang-rape as an offer of marriage or as an attempt to shame his townsmen into doing right, it seems as though they are trying to synthesize these two Lots into one holistic and holy figure. They are trying to reconcile the righteous messenger Lot of Q 7, 26, 27, 29, 54 (and other places where he is simply listed) and the very obviously morally questionable Lot of Sūrah 11 and Sūrah 15. As often happens in such cases, the resulting synthesis is not seamless. Cracks show.

The Bible and Qur'ānic Interpretation

As noted above, Prof. Esack suggests that it is important for scholars of the Qur'ān to engage the Bible and its commentaries, for these can serve as "an indispensable tool akin to *ḥadīth* for *tafsīr*." With this I agree. Scholarly recognition of the continued conversation between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has led, over the past thirty years or so, to a deeper understanding of the scriptures and messages of all three, and to a better appreciation of their vitality and of their impact on the believing world. Even when they are not directly talking to one another, as is the case here with Lot, our putting them in conversation enables us to wrestle with each, to see elements in each that we might not have noticed otherwise.

I suppose I could end my remarks here, but I would like to end instead by taking a page from Prof. Esack's playbook and turn into activist-advocate for a moment. Mine is an academic advocacy: as students of the Qur'ān, we must not only continue to engage the biblical literature, but do it better. By biblical literature, I mean what the Qur'ān usually means and what I think Prof. Esack means—the Bible and its commentaries. It is not enough to read these in English translation, or whatever your reading language is. If we are to continue to engage in intertextual work, to see the biblical materials as "an indispensable tool," we must engage both corpora, the qur'ānic and the biblical, with equal seriousness. We must understand not only what the Qur'ān and the *tafsīr* and the *ḥadīth* are, and what they mean to Muslims and to Islam, but also what the Bible is, and the midrash, and the Talmud, and the patristic sources, and the apocryphal materials, etc. After all, midrash, to refer to only one of these bodies of literature, does not exist *in order* to explain the Qur'ān. Midrash has its own life, its own methodology, and its own exegetical and homiletical goals. In order to use the biblical materials as a tool in Qur'ānic Studies, one must understand these materials on their own and in their contexts.

Since my own field of focus concerns the interrelationship between Islamic and rabbinic exegesis, I would like to bring a more concrete example of what I mean from that arena. Qur'ānic scholars who are curious about the classical

rabbinic commentary on a particular biblical text have often tended to reach for Louis Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*.[13] I do not wish to discourage this good impulse nor to speak ill of this magnificent piece of work. I am not ashamed to admit that I use it. However, we need to understand what *The Legends of the Jews* really is in order to use it well. *The Legends of the Jews* is not a primary midrashic source nor was it intended to be one. When Ginzberg compiled this awesome work in 1909, mind-bogglingly without a computer or Google, he wanted to demonstrate that Jews too have an ancient and noble folklore. In the post-Brothers Grimm Europe in which he lived, folklore meant culture. Prof. Ginzberg thus mined the aggadic-midrashic corpus and sewed together midrashic accounts from across various times and places, disconnecting the exegetical pieces from the textual problems in the Bible upon which they were designed to comment, and wove them into a narrative whole.

Ginzberg writes that when he found conflicting versions, he generally chose only one. While he mentions the other versions in his three volumes of notes, he does not explain the reason why he chose one version over another. Sometimes, he writes, rather than choosing between them he fused conflicting versions into one composite whole. Yet at other times, he admits, he cites one version in one place and another version in another place. He does this, he explains in his preface, "to give a smooth presentation of the matter."[14] His book, he writes, aims to present Jewish folklore in a pleasing and easy-to-read format; it is not meant for the specialist but for the general audience.

The overwhelming majority of the midrashic accounts that appear in *The Legends of the Jews* thus do not appear in their original format, nor with their original context. Treating Ginzberg's text as if it were a translation of a primary source will lead readers to miss critically important linguistic plays, connections to the biblical text, and implied rabbinic critiques. It muddies our ability to distinguish between classical and medieval approaches to given material, even to distinguish Jewish from Christian materials, as Ginzberg notes that he sometimes included the latter.[15] Additionally, scholarly reliance on Ginzberg's text creates a false sense of having done due midrashic diligence. Ginzberg writes that he left out sources that he deemed less important for his purposes.[16] While relying on Ginzberg provides a scholar with an enormous body of literature to sift through, it can at times present an incomplete picture.

13. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold (7 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913–1954).

14. *The Legends of the Jews,* 1.xiv.

15. Ibid., 1.xii–xiii.

16. For a recently published collection of scholarly analyses of Ginzberg's work, see Galit Hasan-Rokem and Ithamar Gruenwald (eds.), *Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the*

So what then am I advocating? On the one hand, as one of my favorite *ḥadīth*s, a *ḥadīth* that I have been quoting since my undergraduate years when I first learned it, counsels: "Seek knowledge even as far as China." Yes, I am aware that this is a contested *ḥadīth* (a fact that does not diminish my love of it). Another *ḥadīth* I have since learned teaches: "Someone asked the Prophet, 'Who is the biggest scholar?' He replied: 'He who is constantly trying to learn from others, for a scholar is ever hungry for more knowledge.'" Another *ḥadīth* urges: "Seek knowledge and wisdom, for whatever the vessel from which it flows, you will never be the loser."

On the other hand, I realize that it is not realistic to ask any one person to know everything there is to know about everything, which total fulfillment of these teachings would seem to require. So—and here is my advocacy—I would like to encourage that which is done far more in the natural sciences than in the humanities, and it is a simple idea: Let us work together more. Let us seek out scholarly partners who have skills and knowledge that we do not. Let us not be afraid to co-author. Good things, like a new understanding of a befuddling qur'ānic passage, come from recognizing our differences and then working together.

Jews: Ancient Jewish Folk Literature Reconsidered (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014).

JIQSA 2 (2017): 47–87

COGNATE AND PARONOMASTIC CURSE RETORTS IN THE QUR'ĀN: SPEECH GENRES AND THE INVESTIGATION OF QUR'ĀNIC LANGUAGE*

DEVIN J. STEWART

Abstract

This study focuses on a sub-genre of the genre of curses in Arabic, the cognate or paronomastic curse, one of the many forms of regular cognate paronomasia (*ishtiqāq*) that have been common in Arabic usage from pre-Islamic Arabic to the modern Arabic dialects. It argues that such curses occur in several passages of the Qur'ān and that an understanding of the genre's usage in general sheds light on its sense and rhetorical effect in those passages. Moreover, the curse *qātalahu'llāhu* ("may God fight him!"), one of the most common qur'ānic curses, serves as a retort to forms of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu* ("to say"). Overall, this investigation suggests that interpretation of the Qur'ān may be advanced by attention to such common Arabic speech genres as well as to biblical language and to high registers of Arabic such as poetry or oratory.

Keywords

blessings, curses, retorts, speech genres, paronomasia, qur'ānic language

This study investigates curses in the qur'ānic text, arguing that a number of them belong to an important sub-category of Arabic curses, that of cognate and paronomastic curse retorts. A qur'ānic example of the cognate curse retort is *ghullat aydīhim* ("may their hands be shackled!") which repeats the

* Research for this study was supported in part by the Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry, Emory University.

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441/jiqsa.2.2018.a004

root consonants *gh-l-l* of a key word in the preceding statement, *yadu'llāhi maghlūlah* ("the hand of God is shackled") (Q Mā'idah 5:64), the word *maghlūlah* ("shackled") serving as the trigger for the curse. Instances of the curses *qātalahumu'llāh* ("may God fight them!") and *qutila* ("may he be killed!") are distinct from *ghullat aydīhim* in that they are not based on exact cognates, responding not to derivatives of the same root consonants, *q-t-l*, but rather to derivatives of the root consonants *q-w-l*, such as *qālū* ("they said"). Paronomastic curses of the latter class have not been pointed out as retorts, to the best of my knowledge, in commentaries on the Qur'ān, works on Arabic rhetoric, or modern scholarship in qur'ānic studies. Nor has the cognate curse retorts' connection with a common speech genre been generally recognized. Both sets of curse retorts share in the same rhetorical and pragmatic function and belong to the same genre. The qur'ānic forms evidently draw on a common genre that occurred regularly in pre-Islamic Arabic speech, and the particular curse retort *qātalaka'llāh* was probably used as a paronomastic retort to forms not only of the cognate verb *qatala*, *yaqtulu* ("to kill") but also of the phonetically similar verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu* ("to say").

The Language of the Qur'ān

Several qur'ānic passages boldly identify Arabic as the language of Islam's sacred text. Questions remain, however, regarding the particular variety of Arabic intended, and the answers to those questions have repercussions for the interpretation of the sacred text. On the one hand, Islamic tradition reports that the Qur'ān reflects the Arabic usage of the Hijaz, the Prophet Muḥammad's native region. Indeed, Karl Vollers suggested in 1906 that the Qur'ān was couched entirely in the colloquial Arabic of the Hijaz, but critics such as Geyer and Nöldeke rejected this view soon after Vollers' work appeared, and it has not found favor since.[1] On the other hand, it is generally agreed that the qur'ānic text is not couched in the vernacular but rather in a high, literary variety of a language that resembles the linguistic medium of classical Arabic poetry. Analysis of qur'ānic orthography suggests that the answer lies between the two poles: the text of the Qur'ān originally reflected some West Arabian dialectal features, such as the omission or elision of

1. Karl Vollers, *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1906); Theodor Nöldeke, "Zur Sprache des Korāns," in *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1910), 1–30, esp. 1–5; Rudolf Geyer, "Rezension zu Karl Vollers, *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien*," *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 171 (1909): 10–55.

hamzah, but was later revised to include written *hamzah*s in keeping with the poetic *koine* or the more conservative dialects of Central and Eastern Arabia.[2]

Yet, even if most scholars of the Qur'ān agree that the sacred text is expressed primarily in a high, non-vernacular form of Arabic, several varieties could be involved. Many interpreters of the Qur'ān within the pre-modern Islamic tradition looked to poetry as the main body of material that might throw light on the linguistic particularities of the Qur'ān.[3] This occurred for two main reasons: the tremendous prestige of poetry, which was viewed as the Arabs' most sublime literary and cultural achievement, and the availability of a substantial corpus of texts with a plausible claim to authenticity and early date. Margoliouth and other scholars in Western Europe challenged the value of pre-Islamic poetry for interpretation of the Qur'ān in the early twentieth century, raising questions about its authenticity.[4] Most famously, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's questioning of the pre-Islamic poetry's authenticity in his work *Fī'l-shiʿr al-jāhilī* provoked a heated controversy in the early twentieth century.[5] As Angelika Neuwirth points out, in Western scholarship from the mid-twentieth century onwards, many of the standard introductions to the Qur'ān suppressed the consideration of poetry altogether.[6] Recently, Neuwirth and others have called for renewed attention to poetry as a variety of Arabic, and perhaps the most important variety, that might throw light on the qur'ānic text.[7] A long controversy has surrounded the poetry of Umayyah b. Abī'l-Ṣalt, which has some obvious connections in content with passages of

2. Chaim Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951).

3. Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: Brill, 1920), 92–93; John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121, 216–218; Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam: L'exégèse coranique de Ṭabarī* (Paris: Vrin, 1990); Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), 149–150; Muḥammad Mālikī, *Ǧuhūd al-Ṭabarī fī dirāsat al-shawāhid al-shiʿriyyah fī Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān* (Fez: Ǧāmiʿat Sīdī Muḥammad Ben ʿAbd Allāh, 1994).

4. Wilhelm Ahlwardt, *Bemerkungen über die Aechtheit der alten arabischen Gedichte* (Greifswald: Bamberg, 1872); Samuel Margoliouth, "The Origins of Arabic Poetry," *ǦRAS* 3 (1925): 417–449.

5. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Fī'l-shiʿr al-jāhilī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1926); idem, *Fī'l-adab al-jāhilī* (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta'līf wa'l-Tarjamah wa'l-Nashr, 1927); Yaron Ayalon, "Revisiting Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *Fī al-Shiʿr al-Ǧāhilī* and Its Sequel," *WI* 49 (2009): 98–121.

6. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 674, n. 7.

7. James E. Montgomery, "The Empty Hijaz," in idem (ed.), *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy, From the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 37–97; Thomas Bauer, "The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qur'anic Studies including Observations on *Kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Context:*

the Qur'ān but has been surrounded by doubts concerning authenticity. The latest publication concerning his poetry, by Nicolai Sinai, suggests that it is indeed useful for the interpretation of qur'ānic material.[8]

However, in focusing on poetry, scholars have relatively neglected several other varieties of pre-Islamic Arabic. The Arabic of oratory and the Arabic of the *kuhhān*, the soothsayers or pagan religious specialists, both arguably exerted considerable influence on the Qur'ān.[9] One may also detect the influence of Hebrew and Aramaic/Syriac religious terminology and forms on the language of the Qur'ān.[10] Thus, at least four varieties of "literary" Arabic—i.e., including the forms of Arabic use in oral literature—may be seen as forming the background of qur'ānic Arabic. That the Qur'ān is not presented in ordinary speech is obvious on account of the tremendous roles that rhyme and rhythm play in the text. Nevertheless, the importance of these literary varieties for the qur'ānic text does not rule out the influence of common forms of Arabic speech, including ordinary greetings, politeness formulae, oaths, blessings, curses, taunts, promises, and other forms of everyday talk. André Jolles addressed a number of such common forms in his 1930 work, *Einfache Formen*, and their analysis has been influential in form-critical studies of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.[11] This essay

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Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 699–732; Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, 672–722.

8. Nicolai Sinai, "Religious Poetry from the Quranic Milieu: Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt on the Fate of the Thamūd," *BSOAS* 74 (2011): 397–416.

9. On the characteristic pronouncements of soothsayers, see Devin J. Stewart, "The Mysterious Letters and Other Formal Features of the Qur'ān in Light of Greek and Babylonian Oracular Texts," in Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* 2 (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 321–346; Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, 682–685. On Arabic oratory, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Classical Arabic Oration* (forthcoming).

10. Theodor Nöldeke, "Zur Sprache des Korans," in *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, 23–30; Carl Anton Baumstark, "Jüdischer and Christlicher *Gebetstypus* im Koran," *Der Islam* 16 (1927): 229–248; idem, "Zur Herkunft der monotheistischen Bekenntnisformel im Koran," *OrChr* 37 (1953): 6–22; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010); Emran El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013); Arthur J. Droge, *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (London: Equinox, 2013), *passim*; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), *passim*.

11. André Jolles, *Einfache Formen: Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1930). See, among the many possible examples, Marion C. Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark, the Classical World, and the Rabbis* (London: Sheffield Press, 2002); Shelley L. Birdsong, *The Last King(s) of Judah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). The early proponents of form criticism often assumed that simple

attempts to show that a specific genre of ordinary Arabic speech, the cognate curse retort, has been incorporated into the Qurʾān. An understanding of the generic conventions and rhetoric of this particular form of Arabic speech, which exists in all major dialects of Arabic and is recorded throughout the history of Arabic literature from the early Islamic period until the present, helps the observer interpret a number of passages in the Qurʾān. The qurʾānic evidence corroborates other evidence that the cognate curse retort existed in pre-Islamic Arabic and strongly suggests that the Qurʾān draws on pre-Islamic everyday, oral speech genres to a greater extent than has been recognized in scholarship to date.

Form Criticism and the Circumstances of Revelation

tabbat yadā abī lahabin wa-tab(b)[12]

May the hands of Abū Lahab perish! And may he perish!
(Q Masad 111:1)

Many commentators identify this curse, which opens Sūrat Abī Lahab (Q 111), as a retort. In justifying this interpretation, they draw on reports included in the literature of *asbāb al-nuzūl* ("circumstances of revelation") which explain that the *sūrah* originated as a condemnation of the Prophet's uncle ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā, who was known by the nickname Abū Lahab, "the Father of Flames," i.e., "the man destined for Hellfire." Abūʾl-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), for example, gives three *ḥadīth* reports to this effect in his *Asbāb al-nuzūl*.

I. One day the Messenger mounted [the hill of] al-Ṣafā and exclaimed, "Woe on this morning!" The Quraysh gathered around him and asked, "What troubles you?" He responded, "Consider this: If I informed you that the enemy would attack you at dawn, or at night, would you not believe me?" They answered, "Yes, of course." He continued, "So, I am a warner to you with a terrible punishment before me." Abū Lahab exclaimed "Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! Have you called us all together for that?!" Then God sent down: "May the hands of Abū Lahab perish!"

forms were characteristic of oral discourse and that these regularly preceded more complex, written forms, but such assumptions were later questioned.

12. The verse-final word is *wa-tabba* ("and may he perish"), but the rhyme of the *sūrah* requires that this word be pronounced *wa-tab*, reducing the geminate *-bb-* to match the final words of the following verses—*kasab*(*a*), *lahab*(*in*), *al-ḥaṭab*(*i*), *masad*(*in*)—in form.

II. The Messenger of God stood and declared, "O descendants of Ghālib! O descendants of Luʾayy! O descendants of Murrah! O descendants of Kilāb! O descendants of ʿAbd Manāf! O descendants of Quṣayy! I have no power to grant you either benefit from God or a portion from this world, unless you say, 'There is no god but God'!" Abū Lahab exclaimed, "Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! You called us for that?!" Then God sent down: "May the hands of Abū Lahab perish!"

III. When Exalted God revealed "Warn your nearest clan…" (Q Shuʿarāʾ 26:214), the Messenger of God came to al-Ṣafā, climbed it, and then exclaimed, "Woe on this morning!" The people gathered around him; some attended themselves, while others sent a messenger. He spoke, "O sons of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib! O sons of Fihr! O sons of Luʾayy! If I were to inform you that a cavalry were waiting at the top of this ridge, intending to attack you, would you believe me?" They answered, "Yes." He said, "So, I am a warner to you with a terrible punishment before me." Abū Lahab exclaimed, "Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! You called us the whole day just for this?!" Then God sent down: "May the hands of Abū Lahab perish!"[13]

The literature of the circumstances of revelation has come under criticism in qurʾānic studies since the nineteenth century, and some scholars opt to ignore the material completely. That such reports could present accurate recordings of rather complex statements and conversations that occurred generations or even centuries before they were demonstrably fixed in written documents is considered historically highly improbable. Like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, they were presumably invented at later dates for particular ideological purposes. Even if, or perhaps especially if, they were created and transmitted with pious intentions, they cannot be trusted as historical sources, and they should be eschewed as a basis on which to build responsible interpretations of the text.[14]

What scholars who adopt this view have largely ignored, however, is that while the circumstances of revelation may not pass muster as authentic historical reports, they may nevertheless be valuable. The genre of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, while it claims to be concerned with historical criticism of the qurʾānic text by identifying the specific historical situations to which

13. ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1992), 263–264.

14. On *asbāb al-nuzūl* in general, see Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey," *BSOAS* 47 (1985): 1–15; idem, "Al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī on the Function of the Occasion of Revelation Material," *IC* 59 (1985): 243–258; idem, "The Function of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Qurʾānic Exegesis," *BSOAS* 51 (1988): 1–20.

particular qur'ānic texts responded, is actually more successful as a type of form criticism. This is a bit different, and in a way more specific, from the general point made by Rippin that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* serve, like the *sīrah*, to fit the qur'ānic material into a particular narrative or interpretive framework. While the authenticity and specifics of the historical accounts provided are often doubtful, the accounts often correctly identify the genre of the text in question, and an understanding of the formal conventions of the genre so identified helps scholars interpret the text more reliably. In other words, such accounts may accurately identify the genre to which the revealed passage in question belongs, performing a fundamental operation that facilitates the interpretation of the text.

It is crucial to note that all three of al-Wāḥidī's accounts share in identifying Sūrat Abī Lahab as a retort to Abū Lahab's curse of the Prophet, *tabban laka* ("perdition to you!"), despite the differences between them.[15] Al-Wāḥidī's first and third accounts are very similar, both mentioning the Prophet's gathering of Quraysh to address them at the hill of al-Ṣafā and his warning them of an approaching attack, while the second differs, lacking these elements. Nevertheless, the second account includes the same exclamation by ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā, *tabban laka* ("perdition to you!"), identifying it as the trigger that provoked the revelation of Sūrat Abī Lahab. Even *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, among the tersest of qur'ānic commentaries, begins the section on Sūrat Abī Lahab the section on Sūrat Abī Lahab with a short account similar to those cited by al-Wāḥidī, thus suggesting the importance of identifying the *sūrah* as a retort: "When the Prophet—God bless him and keep him—called for his tribe to assemble and declared, 'I am a warner to you with a terrible punishment before me,' his uncle Abū Lahab exclaimed, 'Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! You called us just for this?'"[16] Most commentaries on Sūrat Abī Lahab include some version of these *asbāb al-nuzūl* accounts, an admission that identifying the *sūrah* as a retort is fundamental for its interpretation. The circumstances of revelation may in this case be linguistically accurate, even if they are not historically accurate. In other words, even if the events described did not occur, or occurred under different circumstances and involved different actors and speakers, it still appears quite likely that the text of Sūrat Abī Lahab is in

15. The *Sīrah* of Ibn Hishām presents a different and altogether unlikely account, in which Abū Lahab curses his own hands, arguing that the Prophet promises him things that he cannot see and are supposed to reach him in the afterlife, while his hands receive nothing. According to that account, Sūrat Abī Lahab would be reporting on or describing his curse of his own hands. See Ibn Hishām, *Muhammad: A Translation of Isḥāq's [sic]* Sīrat Rasūl Allāh, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 159–160.

16. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, n.d.), 825.

fact a retort. The same may be true, *mutatis mutandis*, for many other reports of the circumstances of revelation.

In the *asbāb al-nuzūl* accounts cited above, the Prophet Muḥammad addresses the Quraysh tribe with a message of warning and concern. Abū Lahab's curse, *tabban laka* ("perdition to you!") is a forceful rebuke of the Prophet, reprimanding him for wasting the time of his audience and perhaps for his presumption in presenting himself as a religious authority. The reprimand is bolstered and authorized by Abū Lahab's status—it reflects an understanding that he, as a senior member of the Quraysh tribe and of the Prophet's own clan, the Banū Hāshim, has the right to criticize and correct the Prophet's behavior. Thus, the curse retort that appears at the opening of the *sūrah* serves to reject Abū Lahab's rebuke. The use of cognates, *tabbat… wa-tabba*, stresses that the curse has been turned back on itself, through the automatic or magical action of language. It is as if, by uttering his curse, Abū Lahab brought about his own condemnation. Not only his reprimand but also his prerogative to judge and correct the Prophet's behavior has been rejected.

What these reports do not make explicit is that Sūrat Abī Lahab draws on a particular type of retort common in popular Arabic speech: the cognate curse retort. The cognate curse retort is the negative counterpart of the cognate blessing response, which occurs frequently in the formulaic exchanges of politeness formulae in the modern Arabic dialects, such as the Egyptian dialect *mabrūk* ("blessed!"; i.e., "congratulations")—*allāh yibārik fīk* ("may God bless you!") in which the key verb in the blessing response, *yibārik*, repeats the root consonants of the key term in the trigger *mabrūk*, *b-r-k*, or *ma'a s-salāma*—*allāh yisallimak* ("[may you go] with safety"—"may God keep you safe") in which the key term in the blessing response repeats the root consonants of *as-salāma*, *s-l-m*.

Dialectal cognate curse retorts occur in such exchanges as Egyptian Arabic *iftaḥ*—*fataḥ fi-rāsak ṭā'a* ("Open"—"May God open a window in your head!") and *khalāṣ*—*khilṣit rōḥak* ("Enough!"—"May your soul run out!") or Moroccan Arabic *ddīni m'āk*—*ddāk wād ḥāmel* ("Take me with you"—"May a flooded river take you away!") and *khallīni*—*ykhallīk blā rās* ("Leave me be!"—"May God leave you without a head!").

The cognate blessing responses generally serve to accept an initial statement, thus indicating approval and recognition that a social obligation was properly fulfilled or that an act of kindness was successfully conveyed and has been appreciated by the recipient. The cognate curses generally do the opposite, rejecting an initial statement, indicating that the utterer spoke or behaved improperly, committing some social infraction, and reprimanding or scolding him or her for doing so. In both cases, the use of cognate paronomasia stresses the swift and automatic nature of the response, as if it were already contained—in embryonic form—in the initial statement. The good expression

of the well-wisher brought about appropriate acceptance and appreciation, while the impropriety of the perpetrator of a social infraction elicited a deserved rebuke. There is a sense in which this occurs almost independently of the wills and intentions of the parties involved, through the magical power of language. The response is not a promise or a threat in which the speaker will act directly to reward or punish. Rather, the reward or punishment will be brought about through a third party, often God, but sometimes by a more impersonal force like the flooded river mentioned above.

This genre is an old one in Arabic, occurring both in classical Arabic literature and religious texts. *Ḥadīth*, the body of oral reports attributed to the Prophet, provides a number of examples of cognate paronomasia used in similar fashion. In the following, the Companion ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb utters a cognate blessing response to the Prophet:

> ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb requested permission to enter upon the Messenger of God when attending him were women of the Quraysh tribe addressing him and asking him as many questions as possible, with their voices louder than his. When ʿUmar asked permission to enter, they stood and hastily donned their headscarves. Then the Messenger of God gave him permission, and ʿUmar entered, while the Messenger of God was smiling (*yaḍḥaku*), so ʿUmar said, "May God cause your teeth to smile" (*aḍḥaka'llāhu sinnak*).[17]

Here, the Prophet's act of smiling or laughing provokes the blessing response, "May God cause your teeth to smile" (*aḍḥaka'llāhu sinnak*), thus registering the acceptance of this act as appropriate and beneficial behavior.

Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 275/889) reports the following *ḥadīth* report about arranging the rows of congregants when praying together in the mosque, on the authority of ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar (d. 74/693): *aqīmū'l-ṣufūfa wa-ḥādhū bayna'l-manākib wa-suddū'l-khalal wa-lā tadharū farajātin li'l-shayṭān man waṣala ṣaffan waṣalahu'llāh wa-man qaṭaʿa ṣaffan qaṭaʿahu'llāh* ("Make straight the rows, align the congregants' shoulders, and fill in the gaps so that no spaces are left for Satan. Whoever connects a row, God will connect him, and whoever cuts off a row, God will cut him off").[18] Another *ḥadīth* report uses similar cognate paronomasia as part of an exhortation to maintain close contact with relatives (*ṣilat al-raḥim*): *al-raḥimu muʿallaqatun bi'l-ʿarshi taqūlu man waṣalanī waṣalahu'llāh wa-man qaṭaʿanī qaṭaʿahu'llāh* ("The womb is attached to God's Throne, saying: 'Whoever connects me, God will connect, and whoever

17. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb faḍāʾil al-ṣaḥābah, bāb manāqib ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb*, 5.

18. Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān b. al-Ashʿath al-Sijistānī, *Al-Sunan, kitāb al-ṣalāh, bāb taswiyat al-ṣufūf*, 6.

cuts me off, God will cut off'").[19] Another version reads *al-raḥim shajanah min al-raḥmān fa-man waṣalahā waṣalahu'llāh* ("The womb is a branch of the Merciful One. Whoever connects it, God will connect").[20]

In all these cases, the cognate blessings and curses serve to stress the immediate consequences, reward and punishment, for proper and improper behavior. Another *ḥadīth* report depicts the Prophet blessing and cursing particular Arab tribes from the minbar: *aslamu sālamahā'llāh wa-ghifāru ghafara'llāhu lahā wa-ʿuṣayyatu ʿaṣati'llāha wa-rasūlah* ("As for Aslam, may God afford them peace; as for Ghifār, may God forgive them; as for ʿUṣayyah, they have disobeyed God and His Messenger").[21] The fact that the cognate expressions are based on the very names of the tribes suggests that they are like inevitable verdicts, attached to the identity of the tribes. It is reported ʿUqbah b. ʿĀmir heard the Prophet make the following pronouncement about wearing amulets: *man ʿallaqa tamīmatan fa-lā atamma'llāhu lahu wa-man ʿallaqa wadaʿatan fa-lā wadaʿa'llāhu lahu* ("Whoever fastens an amulet (*tamīmah*), may God not fulfill (*atamma*) [any plan] for him, and whoever fastens a seashell (*wadaʿah*), may God not mitigate (*wadaʿa*) for him [any danger he might face]").[22] The curses in this statement serve to reject the practice of wearing protective amulets, implying that doing so is based on a certain lack of trust in God's protective power. Similar turns of phrase abound throughout premodern Arabic literature.[23] One well-known example explains how the Batriyyah, a sub-sect of Zaydī Shi'ism, got their name. Representatives of this group appeared before Muḥammad al-Bāqir and his brother Zayd b. ʿAlī and asked whether they should pledge allegiance to ʿAlī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn and denounce their enemies, to which al-Bāqir replied in the affirmative. They asked whether they should also pledge allegiance to Abū Bakr and ʿUmar and denounce *their* enemies. Zayd b. ʿAlī supposedly upbraided them, "Do you denounce Fāṭimah?! Do you denounce Fāṭimah?!" because she would number among their enemies. He then cursed them, "You have cut off our affair—may God cut you off (*batartum amranā—batarakumu'llāh*)!" and this curse became the basis of the name of their sect, al-Batriyyah.[24]

19. Abū'l-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-birr*, 17.

20. Abū ʿĪsā Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā al-Tirmidhī, *Al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-birr*, 16.

21. In a number of versions, only the ʿUṣayyah tribe is mentioned; the Prophet cursed them after they killed all the members of a military expedition he had sent against them. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-manāqib*, 6; *al-maghāzī*, 28; *al-masājid*, 294, 297, 299, 303, 307, 308; *faḍā'il al-ṣaḥābah*, 186, 187.

22. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *Al-Mustadrak ʿalā al-ṣaḥīḥayn, kitāb al-ṭibb*, 79 (no. 7501).

23. See Devin J. Stewart, "Cognate and Analogical Curses in Moroccan Arabic: A Comparative Study of Arabic Speech Genres," *Arabica* 61 (2014): 697–745, 720–721.

24. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Ikhtiyār maʿrifat al-rijāl*

Knowledge of the conventions of this particular genre helps to confirm that the opening verse of Sūrat Abī Lahab is indeed a cognate curse retort. That this formal interpretation is plausible is suggested by the occurrence of the optative verb as the first word in the *sūrah*. As will be seen, the cognate curse tends to follow the trigger expression immediately, so that the *sūrah* appears to be an immediate response to the understood curse *tabban laka*. The structure produced often places the cognate terms in adjacent position, even though they are separated by an utterance boundary, caused by the change in speaker. Also in keeping with the logic of retorts is that the curse in the first verse of the *sūrah* represents an escalation to a more emphatic form. The retort's repetition of the root letters *t-b-b* in *tabbat … wa-tabba*, coupled with the metonymic, concrete reference to Abū Lahab's hands, serves to compound the emphatic rejection of Abū Lahab's putative statement. Such physical metonymies, references to particular body parts such as the hands, feet, belly, back, heart, or head, are a frequent means of emphasis in curses.

Curses that function in a similar formal fashion are widely attested in the modern Arabic dialects, as well as in Arabic literature from classical times to the present. As will be shown below, they also occur in *ḥadīth* and in the Qur'ān itself. Though the accounts presented above do not state this explicitly, the compiler, al-Wāḥidī, as well as many of their readers who were native speakers of Arabic or well versed in common modes of Arabic speech, may have nevertheless understood this implicitly.

The Cognate Curse in Arabic

Arabic has many cognate blessings, occurring primarily in politeness formulas; an initial phrase provokes a conventional polite response in the form of a blessing, and a key word in the response, often the main, optative verb, echoes the tri-consonantal root of a key word in the initial phrase. The most common of these cognate blessing responses occurs in the polite exchange *mabrūk—bāraka'llāhu fīk* ("[May it be] blessed [i.e., congratulations]"—"May God bless you") which occurs, with minor variations, in all major Arabic dialects. Cognate blessing responses represent a large category in Arabic speech, each dialect having its own repertory of standard expressions of this form, and some dialects allowing for significant variation and innovation of particular phrases.[25]

[= *Rijāl al-Kashshī*], ed. Jawād al-Qayyūmī al-Iṣfahānī (Qum: Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 2005), 204–205.

25. Devin J. Stewart, "Root-Echo Responses in Egyptian Arabic Politeness Formulae," in Alaa Elgibali (ed.), *Understanding Arabic: Essays in Contemporary Arabic Linguistics in Honor of El-Said Badawi* (Cairo: American University Press, 1996), 157–180.

Less well known are their negative counterparts, cognate curse retorts, which also occur in all the major dialects of Arabic. Examples include Egyptian *ḥabbak burṣ* ("May a gecko kiss you!"), a retort to *baḥibbik* ("I love you"); Lebanese *shāwī yishwīk wi-nār ti'līk* ("May a griller grill you, and a fire fry you!"), a retort to *shū* ("What?"); the Moroccan *ddāk el-wād* ("May the river carry you off!"), a retort to *ddīni m'āk* ("Take me with you"); or Negev Arabic *yikhull bāṭak* ("May He [God] sew up your armpit!"), a retort to *yā khāl* ("O maternal uncle"). Though on the whole they may be used less frequently in social exchanges than the cognate blessings, the dialects generally have larger repertories of such phrases and allow for more variation and innovation within the genre. I have recorded and analyzed extensive corpora of cognate curses in the modern Egyptian and Moroccan dialects, and Roni Henkin has discussed cognate curses in Negev Arabic, showing, among other things, their widespread use to scold, reprimand, and correct perpetrators of social infractions.[26] Similar cognate curses may be found scattered in classical Arabic literature.[27] The old attestations, together with the ubiquity of cognate curses in Arabic dialects, some of which parallel the old forms almost exactly, suggest that this particular genre of speech goes back to pre-Islamic Arabic usage.[28] In my 1997 study of cognate curse retorts in Egyptian Arabic, I mentioned what is perhaps the most obvious example of this genre in the Qur'ān, Q 5:64, and Werner Diem included a short discussion of this verse in his 2005 work on root-repetition in "wish-sentences," drawing on medieval qur'ānic exegesis. In 2014 I called attention to both Q 5:64 and Q Tawbah 9:127 as members of this genre. Otherwise, to the best of my knowledge, nothing has been written on the specific topic of cognate curses in the qur'ānic corpus.[29]

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26. Devin J. Stewart, review of *Arabisches Volkstheater in Kairo im Jahre 1909: Ahmad ilFar und seine Schwänke*, ed. and trans. Manfred Woidich and Jacob M. Landau, *JAOS* 117 (1997): 190-192; idem, "Impoliteness Formulae: The Cognate Curse in Egyptian Arabic," *JSS* 42 (1997): 327–360; idem, "Curse," *EQ*, s.v. (2001); idem, "Cognate and Analogical Curses in Moroccan Arabic: A Comparative Study of Arabic Speech Genres," *Arabica* 61 (2014): 697–745; Roni Henkin, "The Cognate Curse in Negev Arabic: From Playful Punning to Coexistence Conflicts," *Israel Studies in Language and Society* 2 (2009): 169–206; eadem, *Negev Arabic: Dialectal, Sociolinguistic, and Stylistic Variation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 182–184.

27. Stewart, "Impoliteness Formulae," 329; idem, "Cognate and Analogical Curses," 720–721.

28. Idem, "Cognate and Analogical Curses," 721–722, 740.

29. Idem, "Impoliteness Formulae," 329; idem, "Cognate and Analogical Curses," 719; Werner Diem, *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz: Untersuchungen zur Stilgeschichte des arabischen Dokuments des 7. bis 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 2–3, 22–24.

Scholarship on Cognate Blessings and Curses

There has been limited attention to the cognate curse retort in studies of Arabic. They do not appear in Arabic textbooks, and if some of the curses themselves appear in dictionaries, they are not identified as retorts. This is despite the general recognition by students of Arabic grammar, rhetoric, style, and literature that Arabic makes frequent use of cognate paronomasia. The most common example is the grammatical construction of the *mafʿūl muṭlaq*, literally "accusative absolute," which has been labeled "the cognate accusative" in English. This involves the use of a cognate verbal noun following some verbal form, such as *ḍarabtuhu ḍarban* ("I beat him a beating") meaning "I beat him soundly, or severely." Other common turns of phrase that exhibit cognate paronomasia are *qāla qāʾilun* ("a sayer said"), meaning, "someone said," or *yawman min al-ayyām* ("on a day from among the days"), meaning "one day."[30] Also well known are the cognate blessing responses that occur in politeness formulae; a few are presented in most European grammars of Arabic, both of the written language and of the dialects. Some scholars of the dialects have presented a more substantial list of such responses, such as Dornier in his major collection of the politeness formulae of the Arab tribes in northern Tunisia.[31] The linguist Charles Ferguson, best known in Arabic studies for his seminal article on diglossia, wrote two focused studies analyzing what he termed "root-echo responses" in Syrian Arabic politeness formulae, and I wrote an analysis of similar material from the Egyptian Arabic dialect. Building on this work, and drawing from long experience editing Arabic private letters and other documents found in the collections of major European libraries, Werner Diem published a substantial monograph on "root-repetition" in "wish-sentences" in 2005, including a long list of examples drawn from documents from all periods, but primarily from the late medieval and early modern periods.[32]

30. Hermann Reckendorf, *Über Paronomasie in den semitischen Sprachen* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1909).

31. Père François Dornier, "La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie," *Revue de l'Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 15 (1952): 17–48; idem, "La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie (suite)," *Revue de l'Institute des Belles Lettres Arabes* 16 (1953): 47–69; idem, "La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, la maladie," *Revue de l'Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 16 (1953): 391–399; idem, "La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, la mord," *Revue de l'Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 17 (1954): 99–109; idem, "La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, le mariage," *Revue de l'Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 17 (1954): 251–267; idem, "La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, le mariage," *Revue de l'Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 18 (1955): 93–126.

32. Diem, *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz*.

The cognate blessing responses that figure in Arabic politeness formulae have a negative counterpart in the cognate curse retorts. Whereas the blessing responses generally serve to accept an initial statement and recognize the successful completion of a social duty, the curse retorts generally serve to reject an initial statement and scold the first speaker for a social infraction. Perhaps the first to recognize such curse-retorts as a category was William Marçais, who included several curses that belong to this genre in his study of euphemisms in Algerian Arabic, especially the dialect of Tlemcen and the province of Oran:

> *yā bbwá—allâh yūbîk* "o mon père!"—"que Dieu te donne la peste"
> *yā mmwá—allâh yūmîk* "o ma mère!"—"que Dieu te donne des clous (ūmâya)."
> *yā xâi—allâh yexwîk* "o mon frère!"—"que Dieu te vide le ventre"
> *yā ʿámmi—allâh yöʿmîk* "o mon oncle paternal"—"que Dieu t'aveugle"
> *yā xâli—allāh yexlîk* "o mon oncle maternel!"—"que Dieu te ruine!"

Marçais describes these as formulaic curses with which one responds to an importune child.[33] He did not label or define the genre, but the fact that he placed them together and gave some indication of their usage suggests that he understood them to form a distinct category of speech.[34]

In 1994, I included a brief discussion of paronomastic and cognate curses in Egyptian Arabic in the course of a discussion of the *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* of El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds, which had been published in 1986.[35] In 1997, I published a study of cognate curse retorts in the modern Egyptian Arabic dialect, in which I attempted to define the genre, gather the core repertory of such curses in the dialect, address some of the obscure

33. W. Marçais, "L'Euphémisme et l'antiphrase dans les dialects arabes d'Algérie," in Carl Bezold (ed.), *Orientalische Studien: Theodor Nöldeke zum siebzigsten Geburtstag (2. März 1906) gewidmet von Freunden und Schülern* (2 vols.; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906), 1.425–438, 434, n. 1. I was unaware of Marçais' inclusion of these curses in his work on euphemism when I wrote the studies mentioned above on cognate curse retorts in Egyptian Arabic (1997) and in Moroccan Arabic (2014).

34. On cognate curse retorts of this specific sub-category, those that respond to terms of address, in Egyptian, Moroccan, Negev, and Tunisian Arabic, see Stewart, "Impoliteness Formulae," 344–346; idem, "Cognate and Analogical Curses," 726–728; Henkin, "The Cognate Curse," 175–176; eadem, *Negev Arabic*, 182–183; Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun, "A Formal Analysis of Curses and Blessings in a Bedouin Dialect of Southern Tunisia," *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 64 (2016): 34–68, 58.

35. Devin J. Stewart, "A Contribution to the Lexicography of Egyptian Arabic," *Zeitschrift für arabische Linguistik* 28 (1994): 36–86, 59–61. I also discussed such curses briefly in my review of Woidich and Landau (ed. and trans.) *Arabisches Volkstheater*, 191.

vocabulary found exclusively within the genre (or nearly so) and determine its formal, rhetorical, and pragmatic conventions. In 2014, I published a study of cognate curse retorts, along with analogical curses, in Moroccan Arabic. Roni Henkin has addressed cognate curse retorts in the Arabic dialect of the Negev, Luca D'Anna has discussed such curses in North African dialects, primarily Libyan Arabic, and recently, Veronica Ritt-Benmimun has likewise discussed them in the Arabic dialect of the Marāzīg tribe in the Nefzaoua region of southern Tunisia.[36] In addition, Werner Diem's 2005 monograph, though it deals mainly with cognate blessing responses, covers a number of cognate curse retorts such as *wa-lam yadhhab—adhhaba'llāhu sharwāh wa-ab'ada minnā najwāh* ("He did not go—may God banish his like and rid us of intimate ties with him") and *wa-hādhā'l-'aduwwu'l-muqātalu—qātalahu'llāhu* ("And this enemy combatant—may God fight him").[37]

An Eye for an Eye

The Qur'ān is replete with statements that promise rewards or punishments for various meritorious or nefarious deeds, acts of obedience or righteousness as opposed to crimes or infractions. They are often couched in conditional sentences—or forms that show an affinity with conditional sentences—and they are arguably part of an ancient Semitic traditional structure that has manifestations in laws, omens, proverbs, and other forms. The use of the conditional sentence to portray an act and its recompense, whether positive or negative, has an ancient pedigree in the Near East and in Semitic languages in particular. Scholars' attention focused on its use in series of laws, such as Hammurabi's Code or the Laws of Eshnunna, early on, but they subsequently noted its prominent use in other genres of text such as medical treatises and omen series. In all cases, the conditional sentence conveys a logic of correct, and in some sense automatic, retribution for acts, whether they are propitious or not, fulfillments of obligations or infractions.[38] The most

36. Henkin, "Cognate Curse"; idem, *Negev Arabic*, 182–184; Luca D'Anna, "Aspects of Verbal Politeness in Maghrebi Arabic Dialects" (Ph.D. diss., University of Naples, 2013–2014), 307–311; Ritt-Benmimoun, "A Formal Analysis," 57–63.

37. Diem, *Wurzelrepitition und Wunschsatz*, 235, 535. Diem was aware of my study on cognate blessing responses in Egyptian Arabic but not my 1997 study that defined the cognate curse retort in Egyptian Arabic.

38. Fritz Rudolf Kraus, *Ein Edikt des Königs Ammi-Ṣaduqa von Babylonien* (Leiden: Brill, 1958); idem, "Ein zentrales Problem des altmesopotamischen Rechtes: Was ist der Codex Hammu-rabi?" *Genava* 8 (1960): 283–296; J. J. Finkelstein, "Ammi-Saduqa's Edict and the Babylonian '*Law Codes*,'" *JCS* 15 (1961): 91–104; Reuven Yaron, "Forms in the *Laws* of Eshnunna," *RIDA* 9 (1962): 137–153; Jean Bottéro, "Le 'Code' de Hammurabi," *Annali della Scuola normale superiore di Pisa* 12 (1982): 409–444.

abbreviated, elliptical form of these legal pronouncements is of course the *lex talionis*, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth…" (Lev 24:20; cf. Ex 21:24; Deut 19:21; Q Mā'idah 5:45). Analysis of such "legal" forms has been used in the interpretation of a variety of biblical passages, especially legal texts.[39] Ernst Käsemann, for example, discussed eschatological pronouncements in the New Testament, calling them eschatological judgment pronouncements or the eschatological correlative.[40]

Many qur'ānic passages present pronouncements reminiscent of this "legal" form, whether they consist of plain conditional sentences or of other logically related forms. One salient set of examples, though there are many more, consists of verses that adopt the phrase *ḥabiṭat a'māluhum* ("their deeds came to naught"):

> *wa-man yartadid minkum 'an dīnihi fa-yamut wa-huwa kāfirun fa-ulā'ika ḥabiṭat a'māluhum fi'l-dunyā wa'l-ākhirah* ("Whoever of you reverts from his religion and dies while he is an unbeliever, those, their works will come to naught in this world and the next.") (Q Baqarah 2:217)

> *inna'lladhīna yakfurūna bi-āyāti'llāhi wa-yaqtulūna'l-nabiyyīna bi-ghayri ḥaqqi… ulā'ika'lladhīna ḥabiṭat a'māluhum fi'l-dunyā wa'l-ākhirah* ("Those who reject the signs of God and kill prophets unjustly… those are the ones whose works will come to naught in this world and the next.") (Q Āl 'Imrān 3:21–22)

> *wa'lladhīna kadhdhabū bi-āyātinā wa-liqā'a'l-ākhirati ḥabiṭat a'māluhum* ("Those who reject Our signs and the meeting of the afterlife, their works will come to naught.") (Q A'rāf 7:147)

> *mā kāna li'l-mushrikīna an ya'murū masājida'llāhi shāhidīna 'alā anfusihim bi'l-kufri ulā'ika ḥabiṭat a'māluhum wa-fi'l-nāru hum khālidūn* ("The polytheists have no right to maintain the worship places of God while witnessing against themselves that they are disbelievers. Those, their works will come to naught, and they will abide eternally in the Fire.") (Q Tawbah 9:17)

> *ulā'ika'lladhīna kafarū bi-āyāti rabbihim wa-liqā'ihi ḥabiṭat a'māluhum* ("Those who deny the signs of their Lord and the meeting with Him, their works will come to naught.") (Q Kahf 18:105)

39. S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); G. J. Wenham, "Legal Forms in the Book of the Covenant," *TynBul* 22 (1971): 95–102; Raymond Westbrook, "Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes," *RB* 92 (1985): 247–264.

40. Ernst Käsemann, "Sätze heiligen Rechtes im Neuen Testament," *NTS* 1 (1954–1955): 248–260.

These verses conform to the logic of a conditional sentence. In recompense for specific acts, "their works will come to naught." The cause is evidently divine intervention, but the use of the verb *ḥabiṭat*, with "their works" serving as the agent, emphasizes the automatic nature of the punishment. Furthermore, similar structures pervade qur'ānic discourse, especially passages referring to divine retribution.

Such statements that express retribution often involve the use of cognate or paronomastic terms in close proximity. The most basic version of this is of course the *lex talionis*: *wa-katabnā ʿalayhim fīhā anna'l-nafsa bi'l-nafsi wa'l-ʿayna bi'l-ʿayni wa'l-anfa bi'l-anfi wa'l-udhuna bi'l-udhuni wa'l-sinna bi'l-sinni* ("We decreed for [the Jews] in [the Torah]: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth") (Q Mā'idah 5:45). Another example is *jazā'u sayyi'atin sayyi'atun mithluhā* ("The recompense for an evil deed is an evil deed like it") (Q Shūrā 42:40), which likewise involves simple repetition. Another example is a type of conditional sentence: *fa-man iʿtadā ʿalaykum faʿtadū ʿalayhi bi-mithli māʿtadā ʿalaykum* ("Whoever assaults you, assault him in the same way that he assaulted you") (Q Baqarah 2:194). Here, the verb *iʿtadā* "assaults" in the protasis is echoed in the imperative *faʿtadū* "assault" in the apodosis, which shows that the second act is a reaction to the first. In this case, the third use of the cognate, *bi-mithli māʿtadā ʿalaykum* ("in the same way that he assaulted you"), shows that the two acts are supposed to be not only directly, causally related but also commensurate.

A sustained example of this structure in which retribution is underscored by cognate paronomasia appears in a famous speech attributed to the Umayyad governor of Basra, Ziyād b. Abīhi (d. 53/673). The newly appointed governor, introducing himself to the inhabitants of Basra, delivers to them a series of stern warnings that adopt the form of legal pronouncements:

> *fa-man gharraqa qawman gharraqnāhu wa-man aḥraqa qawman aḥraqnāhu wa-man naqaba baytan naqabnā ʿan qalbihi wa-man nabasha qabran dafannāhu ḥayyan fīhi fa-kuffū ʿannī aydiyakum wa-alsinatakum akfuf ʿankum yadī wa-lisānī*
>
> Whoever drowns someone, we will drown him. Whoever burns someone, we will burn him. Whoever breaches the wall of a house, we will breach the wall of his chest, exposing his heart. Whoever robs a grave, we will bury him alive in it. If you hold back your hands and tongues from me, I will hold back my hand and tongue from you.[41]

The use of pairs of cognate verbal forms—*gharraqa/gharraqnāhu* ("drowns/we will drown"), *aḥraqa/aḥraqnāhu* ("burns/we will burn"), *naqaba/naqabnā*

41. Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *Al-Bayān wa'l-tabyīn*, ed. A. M. Hārūn (4 vols. in 2; Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1985), 2.41.

("breaches, we will breach"), *kuffū/akfuf* ("you hold back/I will hold back")—emphasizes the causal relationship between the initial act and the threatened retribution. The punishment fits the crime, and the repetition of the root consonants emphasizes the automatic, swift, and inevitable connection between the two.

In ancient Near Eastern tradition, legal pronouncements were also expressed in the form of curses. A striking example of this occurs in a series of laws for the tribes of Israel that Moses instructed should be read out to them on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal:

> And the Levites shall speak, and say unto all the men of Israel with a loud voice, Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination unto the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place. And all the people shall answer and say, Amen. Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmark. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with his father's wife; because he uncovereth his father's skirt. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with any manner of beast. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with his sister, the daughter of his father, or the daughter of his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with his mother in law. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that smiteth his neighbour secretly. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that taketh reward to slay an innocent person. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen.[42]

The curses in this series are based on the underlying logic of the conditional sentence: if someone commits an infraction of the rule, he will suffer the consequences. The example of Sūrat Abī Lahab cited above may be viewed in a similar fashion. ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā's initial reprimand of the Prophet—*tabban laka!*—provoked the curse with which the *sūrah* begins, in which the key optative verb is parallel to and cognate with that reprimand—*tabbat yadā abī lahab*. After presenting an overview of curses in the Qurʾān, the following remarks will focus on qurʾānic passages that resemble the opening curse of Sūrat Abī Lahab, that is, that contain cognate and paronomastic curse retorts.

42. Deut 27:14–26 (KJV).

Curses in the Qur'ān

Curses and blessings occur regularly in the Qur'ān, something that is not surprising given the focus of the text on the ultimate destiny of humanity: alternatively torment in Hell or bliss in the gardens of Paradise. The verb *la'ana* ("to curse" or "to damn") and the noun *al-la'nah* ("curse") occur thirty-two times in the Qur'ān; related terms include *ghaḍab* ("anger") and its cognates, which occur twenty-six times in the Qur'ān, and *sakhaṭ* ("wrath") and its cognates (Q Āl 'Imrān 3:162; Mā'idah 5:80; Tawbah 9:58; Muḥammad 47:28). God regularly curses unbelievers, apostates, hypocrites, and Satan. On other occasions, perpetrators of specific legal infractions such as Sabbath-breakers, murderers, and those who accuse innocent women of adultery are cursed (Q Nisā' 4:47, 93; Nūr 24:23). While in some cases the curse of God entails only eternal damnation (Q Nisā' 4:93; Aḥzāb 33:64; Fatḥ 48:6), in other cases it causes both destruction in this world and damnation in the afterlife (Q Hūd 11:60). Prophets such as Noah, Moses, and Jesus curse the unbelievers among their people for rejecting God's message.[43]

Curses are often expressed by perfect verbs with an optative sense, either in the active voice, as in *la'anahumu'llāh* ("may God damn them") (Q Baqarah 2:88; Aḥzāb 33:57), or in the passive voice, as in *lu'inū* ("may they be damned") (Q Mā'idah 5:64). Because the optative mood is formally identical to the perfect indicative, differences of opinion have arisen among the commentators regarding many of the curses in the Qur'ān: what some interpret as a *du'ā'* (curse or blessing), others interpret as a declarative sentence with a verb in the indicative mood (*khabar*, *ikhbār*). A well-known example of this occurs in Sūrat Abī Lahab (Q 111), which has been mentioned above. The opening verse, *tabbat yadā abī lahabin wa-tabba*, means "may the hands of Abū Lahab be destroyed, and may he be destroyed!" if the verbs are interpreted as optative, but "the hands of Abū Lahab have been destroyed, and he has been destroyed" if the verbs are considered indicative.

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) in *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* adopts a compromise of sorts, interpreting the first verb as an optative curse and the second as a declarative statement in the indicative: "May the hands of Abū Lahab be destroyed, and he has indeed been destroyed," an equivalent to the putative statement *ahlakahu'llāhu wa-qad halaka* ("may God destroy him, and he has indeed been destroyed"). These are both understood to emphasize the inevitability of the threatened event once it has been decided.[44] Several

43. See Devin J. Stewart, "Curse," *EQ*, s.v. (2001).

44. *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, 825. Indeed, Abū Muḥammad Sulaymān b. Mihrān al-A'mash (d. 148/765–766) is supposed to have read the end of the verse *wa-qad tabba* "and he was indeed destroyed." Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī

other instances of curses gave rise to similar differences of opinion among the commentators. Thus, al-Ṭabarī interprets the text *qutila aṣḥābu'l-ukhdūd* (Q Burūj 85:4) to mean "may the Companions of the Trench be killed!" an equivalent of the common curse *lu'ina* ("may they be damned!"). However, he also reports some commentators' interpretation of this phrase as a declaration on the part of God that the fire indeed killed them.[45] Abū'l-Khayr ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286) observes that the curse *ṣarafa'llāhu qulūbahum* ("May God turn their hearts") (Q 9:127) "supports interpretation both as a declarative sentence and as a curse" (*yaḥtamilu'l-ikhbār wa'l-du'ā'*).[46]

In addition to *la'ana* ("to curse, damn"), several qurʾānic curses involve forms derived from the verb *qatala, yaqtulu* ("to kill"): specifically, *qātala* ("he fought") and the passive *qutila* ("he was killed"). The verb *qātala* occurs as a curse twice: *qātalahumu'llāh* ("may God fight them!") (Q Tawbah 9:30; Munāfiqūn 63:4). The passive *qutila* ("may he be killed!") occurs five times (Q Dhāriyāt 51:10; Muddaththir 74:19, 20; ʿAbasa 80:17; Burūj 85:4). Their relative frequency suggests that they were standard curses already in pre-Islamic Arabic; they will be discussed in greater detail below.

Another formal type of curse that occurs in the Qurʾān consists of a noun-phrase in which an accusative noun is understood to be an accusative absolute modifying a suppressed verb. Examples include *fa-ta'san lahum wa-aḍalla a'mālahum* ("May misery befall them, and may He make their actions vain!") (Q Muḥammad 47:8), and *fa-suḥqan li-aṣḥābi'l-sa'īr* ("May the denizens of Hell-fire be far removed!") (Q Mulk 67:11), in which the accusative verbal nouns *ta'san* ("misery") and *suḥqan* ("distance") express the curse. The similar noun phrase *bu'dan li-*, lit. "distance to," is the most common curse of this type: *bu'dan li'l-qawmi'l-ẓālimīn* ("May the wrongdoing folk be far removed!") (Q Hūd 11:44; see also 11:60, 68, 95; Muʾminūn 23:41, 44). A curse of similar form is created by inversion of the greeting *marḥaban* ("welcome!"): *lā marḥaban bikum* ("May you not be welcome!") (Q Ṣād 38:60).

Yet another type of curse consists of a nominal sentence such as *waylun li-* ("woe, misfortune to") which may be interpreted as a case of ellipsis as well: "*may there be* woe unto…" The curse *waylun yawma'idhin li'l-mukadhdhibīn* ("Woe on that day to the deniers!") serves as a refrain in Sūrat al-Mursalāt

al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān wa'l-mubayyin li-mā taḍammanahu min al-sunnah wa-āy al-furqān* (24 vols.; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 2006), 22.544.

45. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan ta'wīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad Maḥmūd Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (24 vols.; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 2000), 24.337.

46. Abū'l-Khayr ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Marʿashlī (5 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1998), 3.103.

(Q Mursalāt 77:15, 19, 24, 28, 34, 37, 40, 45, 47, 49) and also in other verses in identical form (Q Ṭūr 52:11; Muṭaffifīn 83:10). It occurs in modified forms in other texts as well, such as *fa-waylun li'lladhīna kafarū min yawmihimu'lladhī yūʿadūn* ("Woe to the unbelievers from their day that they have been promised") (Q Dhāriyāt 51:60) and so on (Q Baqarah 2:79; Ibrāhīm 14:2; Maryam 19:37; Anbiyāʾ 21:18; Ṣād 38:27; Zumar 39:22; Fuṣṣilat 41:6; Shūrā 43:65; Jāthiyah 45:7). These are the three main formal types of curses that occur in the Qurʾān.

Functions of Cognate Paronomasia in the Qurʾān

Both general paronomasia (*jinās*, *tajnīs*), in which two or more words with similar sounds occur in close proximity, and cognate paronomasia (*ishtiqāq*), in which the phonetically similar elements in close proximity share the same tri-consonantal root, occur frequently in the Qurʾān.[47] Western scholarship in Qurʾānic Studies has paid little attention to paronomasia, with the exception of an article by Andrew Rippin; modern Arabic scholarship includes a number of relevant studies. These studies discuss scores of qurʾānic puns, including cases of cognate paronomasia, but tend to focus on exceptional or idiosyncratic uses of this rhetorical figure while omitting consideration of entire classes of paronomastic expressions that represent stylized, regular features of qurʾānic discourse and occur so frequently in the text as to become commonplace.[48] In some cases, one must entertain the possibility that such constructions belonged to spoken Arabic usage and were adapted and incorporated into the sacred text.

Paronomasia appears most frequently in the Hebrew Bible in folk etymologies in connection with personal names. Thus Adam's name is related to *ădāmâ* ("earth") because he was formed out of clay; Jacob was called Jacob (*yaʿăqōb*) because he grabbed Esau's heel (*ʿāqeb*); and Isaac is named *yiṣḥāq*, literally "he laughs," because his mother, Sarah, "laughs" (*tiṣḥaq*) when she is

47. Werner Diem suggests that the two categories of paronomasia proper (*jinās* or *tajnīs*) must be distinguished from repetition (*takrīr*, *tikrār*, *tardīd*) and cognate paronomasia (*ishtiqāq*), the last of which is very common in the Semitic languages. He suggests for the last the term *figura etymologica* or "etymologische Figur" instead. Werner Diem, "Paronomasie: Eine Begriffsverwirrung," *ZDMG* 157 (2007): 299–351.

48. Andrew Rippin, "The Poetics of Qurʾānic Punning," *BSOAS* 57 (1994): 193–207; Maʿhad b. Mukhtār, *Fann al-jinās fī'l-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Jordan: al-Jāmiʿah al-Urdunniyyah, 1995); Muḥammad al-Sayyid Mūsā, *Fann al-jinās fī'l-Qurʾān al-karīm* (al-Manṣūrah, Cairo: Kullīyyat al-Tarbiyah, 1421/2000); Ḥusayn Aḥmad ʿAlī Abū Kattah al-Darāwīsh, "*Jinās al-ishtiqāq fī Juzʾ ʿamma fī'l-Qurʾān al-karīm: dirāsah balāghiyyah dalālīyyah*," *Ṣaḥw li-Nahḍah ʿIlmiyyah* 3 (July 2013): 608–620.

told that she will bear him.[49] This last pun is repeated in the Qur'ān despite the fact that it does not work well in Arabic, the verb for her laughter being *ḍaḥikat* and the name of Isaac *Isḥāq*—so that only one of the three root consonants, *ḥ*, matches (Q Hūd 11:71).[50] Rippin discusses several other such puns that occur in the Qur'ān. He argues that the Queen of Sheba's statement, *rabbi innī zalamtu nafsī wa-aslamtu ma'a sulaymāna li'llāhi rabbi'l-'ālamīn* ("O my Lord, I have wronged myself! I submit alongside Solomon to God, the Lord of all Being") (Q Naml 27:44), stresses that Solomon in particular, and not any other prophet, brought about Sheba's submission.[51] Overall, Rippin's study is concerned with the occasional or exceptional use of paronomasia as a literary device, whereas the concern here is with its regular, repeated use, drawing on common forms of Arabic speech which follow similar conventions and embedded rhetorical strategies.

In a number of cases, cognate paronomasia occurs in a structure that suggests a causal relationship. Typical examples are the following: *ista'īnū bi'l-ṣabri wa'l-ṣalāti inna'llāha ma'a'l-ṣābirīn* ("Seek succor through patience and prayer—God is with those who are patient") (Q Baqarah 2:153) and *wa'ṣbirū inna'llāha ma'a'l-ṣābirīn* ("Have patience—God is with those who are patient") (Q Anfāl 8:46). Both passages convey a causal connection, suggesting an understood conditional sentence, "If you are patient, then God will support you," because God tends to reward patience. A similar example indeed takes the form of a conditional sentence: *idhā qīla lakum tafassaḥū fi'l-majālisi fa'fsaḥū yafsaḥi'llāhu lakum* ("When you are commanded, 'Make room!' in the assemblies, then make room, and God will make room for you") (Q Mujādilah 58:11). Here the imperative *fa'fsaḥū* ("make room") is the protasis of a conditional sentence in which the jussive verb *yafsaḥ* ("God will make room") is the apodosis. The meaning understood is, "If you make room, then God will make room for you."

A similar structure occurs in a report about the Egyptians who rejected Moses' preaching: *fa-lammā zāghū azāgha'llāhu qulūbahum* ("When they went astray, God sent their hearts astray") (Q Ṣaff 61:5). Here the cognate paronomasia between *zāghū* and *azāgha* is striking, particularly because they appear adjacent to each other without any intervening elements, as is the case in *fa'fsaḥū yafsaḥi'llāhu lakum*, and as often occurs in other cognate curses and blessings. The contiguity of the two cognate words highlights the automatic and rapid nature of the response, as well as the idea that it is an

49. See Gen 18:16. These folk etymologies generally do not withstand scrutiny. Isaac is presumably the incomplete form of a theophoric name meaning "(the god) smiles on him."

50. See Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext*, 87–96.

51. Rippin, "The Poetics of Qur'ānic Punning," 202–203.

equal and opposite reaction to an initial infraction. In this case, one may argue that the "hearts" mentioned are not literal but metonymic, referring to the offenders themselves. For this reason, the lexicographer and grammarian Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Sahl al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923), author of the influential work *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, paraphrases *azāgha'llāhu qulūbahum* as *aḍallahum* ("he led *them* astray").[52] The use of *qulūbahum* ("their hearts") instead of *them* serves as a type of escalation, mention of a particular body part rendering the curse more physical, something that occurs commonly in modern dialectal curses. Even though this example is not formally a curse, it closely resembles a cognate curse retort proper. In fact, Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Gharnāṭī (d. 745/1344) compares this statement with a cognate curse that will be discussed below, *thumma'nṣarafū ṣaraf'llāhu qulūbahum* ("Then they departed—may God turn their hearts!") (Q Tawbah 9:127).[53] Other verses that seem to convey a similar logic include *thumma tāba ʿalayhim li-yatūbū* ("Then He forgave them, that they might repent") (Q Tawbah 9:118) and *nasū'llāha fa-ansāhum anfusahum* ("They forgot God, so He caused them to forget themselves") (Q Ḥashr 59:19). In both cases, the cognate paronomasia emphasizes the logic of action and reaction while suggesting that the result was predetermined, contained in embryo in the initial step.

Cognate Curses in the Qurʾān

Cognate curses occur in the Qurʾān, and some medieval rhetorical works in fact cite them as examples of *jināS* or paronomasia, without, however, noting that they are cognate curses in particular and thus belong to a particular speech genre with its own formal, semantic, and rhetorical conventions.[54] The example of the opening verse of Sūrat Abī Lahab, which may be considered a cognate curse retort even though the trigger to which it responds does not appear in the text, has been examined above. In the following cases, both the initial statement or trigger and the cognate curse retort occur in the text itself.

I. A salient example is the text *qālati'l-yahūdu yadu'llāhi maghlūlatun—ghullat aydīhim wa-luʿinū bimā qālū bal yadāhu mabsūṭatāni yunfiqu kayfa yashāʾu* ("The Jews said, 'God's hand is shackled'—May their hands be shackled, and may they be damned for what they said! Nay! His hands

52. Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Sahl al-Zajjāj, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān wa-iʿrābuhu*, ed. ʿAbd al-Jalīl ʿAbduh Shalabī (5 vols.; Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1988), 5.164.

53. Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Gharnāṭī, *Al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ed. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd et al. (8 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1983), 5.120.

54. Stewart, "Impoliteness Formulae," 329; "Cognate and Analogical Curses," 719.

are open wide, and He spends however He wishes") (Q 5:64). Here the optative verb in the curse, *ghullat*, repeats the tri-consonantal root of the key term in the preceding statement, *maghlūlah* ("shackled"). The structure places the two cognate words next to each other, without any intervening words. Indeed, the statement creates the chiastic structure C B A—A′B′C′—*qālat… yadu… maghlūlah / ghullat aydīhim… qālu*—as if it were reversing the effect of their statement by inverting it. Neal Robinson has pointed out this chiastic structure, though he adds an additional parallel between *al-yahūdu* ("the Jews") and *lu'inū* ("they are cursed"), creating a structure D C B A—A′B′C′ D′. He observes, "the rhetorical effect of the chiasmus is to predispose the reader to accept the correctness of the qur'ānic verdict."[55] In my view, this captures the automatic aspect of the curse retort, but not its function as an emphatic reprimand.

The commentators are in general agreement that the initial statement is figurative—otherwise it would be too anthropomorphic—and that it reports a claim on the part of certain Jews that God withholds His bounty. A number of commentators attribute the statement to Finḥāṣ b. ʿĀzūrāʾ, a Jew of Medina.[56] The context suggests that it is a curse, but because of the ambiguity involved in the use of the perfect verb, some commentators adopt the opinion that it is a declarative sentence. Most commentators report that it could be either.

For example, Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl b. Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) reports the interpretation that the phrase *ghullat aydīhim* is a declaration (*ikhbār*) that the Jews were shackled in Hell; the conjunction *wa-* or *fa-* would be understood. He attributes this view to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and states that the Mu'tazili theologian Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Jubbāʾī (d. 303/915) preferred it. He also reports the view that it is a curse.[57] My view is that it definitely is a curse, expressing a wish that a punishment befall the utterers of the blasphemous statement in the future. Abū'l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) states that the phrase could be taken figuratively, meaning that the Jews have been condemned

55. Neal Robinson, "Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of Sūrat al-Mā'ida," *JQS* 3 (2001): 1–19, 10–11.

56. E.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 14.201. On the possible connection of this statement with rabbinic literature, see Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 58–59.

57. Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Rasūlī al-Mukhallilātī (10 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1992), 3.275.

to a life of stinginess because they claimed that God was stingy, or literally, as a wish that they be taken prisoner in this world and have their hands shackled, and be shackled in Hell.[58] Many commentators prefer the former interpretation. Al-Bayḍāwī reports that the text curses the Jews to become stingy and miserable, or to suffer poverty and humiliation (*duʿā' ʿalayhim bi'l-bukhl wa'l-nakad aw bi'l-faqr wa'l-maskanah*).[59] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAlī Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) reports three interpretations in the commentarial tradition. According to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the phrase should be taken literally and interpreted to mean that the Jews' hands will be shackled in Hell. According to Abū'l-Ḥasan Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767), it means *umsikat ʿan al-khayr* ("May their hands be prevented from doing good"). According to al-Zajjāj, it means *juʿilū bukhalā'* ("May they be made stingy"), following the clear parallelism in the text.[60] Al-Zajjāj cites Arabic language experts as stating, *ujībū ʿalā qadri kalāmihim* ("They were answered in proportion to what they said").[61] This expresses the rhetorical essence of the cognate curse: the root-consonant echo serves to counter the initial statement while suggesting that the initial statement contained the seeds of its own downfall: the Jews who made the claim about God have had their words turned against them.

Al-Zamakhsharī is the only commentator in the tradition who recognizes that this—or any other curse retort in the Qur'ān—belongs to a common genre of Arabic speech.[62] With regard to this curse in particular, he makes the insightful observation that the phonetic parallelism is accompanied by a semantic shift, because the second term *ghullat* retains the original sense of the word "to shackle" rather than the figurative meaning "to cause to withhold, make stingy" intended in *maghlūlah* ("stingy") (*al-ṭibāq min ḥaythu'l-lafẓ wa-mulāḥaẓat aṣl al-majāz*). He then compares it to a cognate curse that derives from general Arabic usage rather than the text of the Qur'ān: "As when you say, *sabbanī sabba'llāhu dābirahu* 'He insulted me—may God cut his root!'" His point is that the curse *sabba'llāhu dābirahu* uses the original or root meaning of the verb *sabba*, "to cut," rather than the

58. Abū'l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl* (4 vols.; Cairo: Dār ʿĀlam al-Maʿrifah, n.d.), 1.350–351.

59. Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, 2.135.

60. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAlī Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ʿilm al-tafsīr* (9 vols.; Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1984), 2.392.

61. Al-Zajjāj, *Maʿānī al-Qur'ān*, 2.190.

62. Werner Diem observed this already in *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz*, 22–24.

conventional meaning "to insult, revile."[63] This sort of semantic shift serves to increase the shock value of cognate curses, and it is prevalent in modern dialectal curses.[64] Al-Zamakhsharī's comparison of this verse with a profane Arabic curse retort shows that he understands it to follow the ordinary conventions of such curses in Arabic speech.

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿUmar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) assigns a special status to the curse in Q 5:64 when he claims that God means by it to provide instruction on how to curse, or to show that cursing is in fact an acceptable practice. Al-Rāzī compares it with the text *la-tadkhulunna'l-masjida'l-ḥarām in shā'a'llāhu āminīn* ("You will indeed enter the Sacred Mosque, if God wills, safely") (Q Fatḥ 48:27), in which God taught use of the prophylactic phrase *in shā' allāh* ("if God wills") when referring to the future, a practice termed *istithnā'* ("exception").[65] The verse therefore serves as an archetype, a model for all other curses, just as other verses in the Qur'ān sanction and provide models for other speech genres.

II. A second cognate curse in the Qur'ān is *thumma'nṣarafū—ṣarafa'llāhu qulūbahum* ("Then they withdrew—may God turn their hearts!") (Q 9:127). Al-Bayḍāwī makes the typical statement that the phrase could be either a declaration or a curse.[66] In my view it is certainly a curse, and this is the view of Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), who states that it is a curse like *qātalahumu'llāh* ("May God fight them.")[67] He adds that on account of this verse, Ibn ʿAbbās held that one should not say *inṣarafnā ʿani'l-ṣalāt* to announce the end of prayer, so as to avoid a phrase that God had used to curse unbelievers. Instead, one should state, *qaḍaynā al-ṣalāt* ("We have completed prayer.") Al-Qurṭubī reports that when a preacher at a funeral told the attendees *inṣarifū raḥimakumu'llāh* ("Depart, may God have mercy on you"), he was reproached on the grounds that God blamed a group and said, *thumma'nṣarafū ṣarafa'llāhu qulūbahum* ("Then they departed—may God turn their hearts"). Rather, one should say, *inqalibū raḥimakumu'llāh* ("Return—may God have mercy

63. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 1.351.

64. Stewart, "Impoliteness Formulae," 333–334; idem, "Cognate and Analogical Curses," 718.

65. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿUmar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-shahīr bi'l-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (32 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 12.44.

66. Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, 3.103.

67. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 10.438.

on you") because God said about a group that He praised, *fa'nqalabū bi-niʿmatin min allāhi wa-faḍlin lam yamsashu sū'* ("So they returned with grace and favor from God, no harm having touched them") (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:174).[68]

In any case, it is clear that the optative verb in *ṣarafa'llāhu qulūbahum* echoes the root consonants in the initial statement *inṣarafū* ("they departed"). The curse serves to denounce them for doing so, suggesting that they brought on their own condemnation by acting against God's will. "Their hearts" serves as a metonymic reference to their persons, and is one of the ways in which the curse is made emphatic. Use of this same type of metonomy may be seen in the opening verse of Sūrat Abī Lahab and in many ordinary curses.

III. A clear example of the cognate curse occurs in Q Tawbah 9:79: *alladhīna yalmizūna'l-muṭṭawwiʿīna min al-mu'minīna fī'l-ṣadaqāti wa'lladhīna lā yajidūna illā juhdahum fa-yaskharūna minhum sakhira'llāhu minhum wa-lahum ʿadhābun alīm* ("Those who deride such of the believers as give alms willingly and such as can find naught to give but their effort and who mock them—may God mock them! Theirs will be a painful doom") (Q 9:79). Here, the curse *sakhira'llāhu minhum* ("May God mock them") responds to the statement *yaskharūna minhum* ("They mock them") using the same root consonants (*s-kh-r*). Al-Qurṭubī identifies this phrase as a curse. He also reports an assessment attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, according to which it is a report of God's completed action: God mocked them by sending them to Hell. However, al-Qurṭubī's presentation makes it clear that, in his view, this suggestion is incorrect, and the statement is a curse.

IV. Another instance of the cognate curse, though of slightly different form, is Q Baqarah 2:10: *fī qulūbihim maraḍun fa-zādahumu'llāhu maraḍan wa-lahum ʿadhābun alīmun bimā kānū yakdhibūn* ("In their hearts is a disease, so may God increase their disease! A painful doom is theirs because they lied"). Here, the noun *maraḍ* that occurs in the initial phrase *fī qulūbihim maraḍun* is repeated in the curse *zādahumu'llāhu maraḍan*. The cognate root consonants do not occur in the optative verb, *zādahum*, as is usually the case in this construction. Al-Qurṭubī states that this is a curse against the hypocrites and compares it to the curse *fa-zādathum rijsan ilā rijsihim* (Q Tawbah 9:125), which occurs in the following passage:

68. Ibid.

> *wa-idhā mā unzilat sūratun fa-minhum man yaqūlu ayyukum zādathu hādhihi īmānan fa-ammā'lladhīna āmanū fa-zādathum īmānan wa-hum yastabshirūn wa-ammā'lladhīna fī qulūbihim maraḍun fa-zādathum rijsan ilā rijsihim wa-mātū wa-hum kāfirūn*
>
> When a *sūrah* is revealed, among them are those who ask, "Which of you did this increase in belief?" Those who believe, may they be increased in faith, while they see this as glad tidings. Those in whose hearts is a disease, may it increase them in filth upon their filth, and may they die unbelievers. (Q 9:124–25)

In both cases, even though these sentences begin with the conjunction *fa-*, it appears preferable to interpret them as curses. The verse may thus be counted as a proper cognate curse.

V. Later on in the same passage of Sūrat al-Baqarah devoted to the hypocrites, another cognate retort occurs that I would interpret as a curse:

> *wa-idhā laqū'lladhīna āmanū qālū āmannā wa-idhā khalaw ilā shayāṭīnihim qālū innā ma'akum innamā naḥnu mustahzi'ūn / allāhu yastahzi'u bihim wa-yamudduhum fī ṭughyānihim ya'mahūn*
>
> And when they fall in with those who believe, they say, "We believe," but when they go apart to their devils, they declare, "We are with you; verily we are but mocking." / May God mock them and leave them to wander blindly on in their arrogance. (Q 2:14–15)

This passage presents a statement of the hypocrites, *innamā naḥnu mustahzi'ūn* ("We are but mocking"), and this triggers a denunciation in the form of a cognate retort: *allāhu yastahzi'u bihim*. One may question whether this is to be understood as a simple statement or as a curse. The commentators generally do not interpret it as a curse, mainly because it uses the imperfect form of the verb rather than the perfect. Though the optative is most often expressed in classical Arabic with the perfect verb, this is not categorically so—the imperfect also occurs. For example, a famous *ḥadīth* of the Prophet provides the correct politeness formula to utter when someone sneezes: *yarḥamukumu'llāh* ("may God have mercy on you") using the imperfect verb. The polite response on the part of the one who has sneezed also uses imperfect verbs: *yahdīkumu'llāhu wa-yuṣliḥu bālakum* ("May God guide you and set your mind aright"). So, it is at least possible that the imperfect in *allāhu yastahzi'u bihim* could convey a curse. If it were a straight statement, then it would seem a bit less emphatic as a denunciation

> of their statement, and as evident from the example of *yadu'llāhi maghlūlatun—ghullat aydīhim*, curses often serve to denounce specific quoted statements.

There are many other cases in the Qurʾān of cognate constructions used to emphasize God's superior power, and these tend to be straight statements that place God and the culprits in parallel position, implying a comparison. Those, however, tend to use the same cognate forms such as two participles, for example, and they use conjunctions or other linguistic elements to establish the parallelism. In this case, the forms are different, a participle on the one hand and an imperfect verb on the other. Importantly, there is no conjunction. Both points caught the attention of commentators. The passage could have read *innamā naḥnu mustahziʾūn*, followed by an answer such as *wa-llāhu mustahziʾun bihim* ("but God is mocking"). Comparison with the example *yaskharūna minhum—sakhira'llāhu minhum* suggests the possibility that it is also a curse.

Qātalaka'llāh and *Qutila*: Paronomastic Curses

The curses *qātalaka'llāh* ("may God fight you!") and the passive *qutila* ("may he be killed!") feature relatively frequently in the Qurʾān. While they were evidently used in cognate curse retorts in other discourses, they do not appear in the Qurʾān as such. Rather, they occur in contexts in which they respond to terms that resemble *qātala* phonetically but are not strictly cognates. In particular, they respond especially to forms of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*, *qawlan* ("to say").

The curse *qātalaka'llāh* ("may God fight you!") is one of the most common in classical Arabic. While in the modern Arabic dialects it is only heard in classicizing and religious contexts, such as plays and movies about early Islamic history (belonging to the same register as the insult *yā ʿaduwwa'llāh* ["O enemy of God"]), it occurs in the Qurʾān, in the *ḥadīth*, and in classical Arabic poetry, in addition to medieval Arabic literature, something which suggests that it was probably in use already in pre-Islamic times. According to some accounts, the curse even occurs in Paradise. Whenever a mundane wife torments her husband, she becomes the object of curses uttered by her paradisiacal co-wife, who rushes to the husband's defense, cursing her rival, "may God fight you!" (*qātalaki'llāh*).[69]

69. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrāḥ*, ed. Zāʾid b. Aḥmad al-Nushayrī (Mecca: Dār ʿĀlam al-Fawāʾid, 2007), 512.

Several pieces of evidence suggest that *qātalaka'llāh* was a standard curse. Qur'ānic commentators regularly gloss it as *laʿanaka'llāh* ("may God damn you"), making it equivalent to the archetypal curse. Commentators often use it as the example to which other curses are compared. Discussing the phrase *wa'nṣarafū ṣarafa'llāhu qulūbahum* (Q 9:127), al-Qurṭubī writes, "This is an expression by which one curses, like *qātalahumu'llāh* 'God fight them.'"[70]

In addition, the curse *qātalahu'llāh* gave rise to common euphemisms, ordinarily an indication of frequent usage. Al-Ṭabarī reports that the Arabs would say *qātalaka'llāh* and *qātaʿaka'llāh* and that the latter is "less harsh" (*ahwan*) than the former.[71] Abū'l-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr al-Khazrajī (d. 711/1311–1312) reports in *Lisān al-ʿarab* that *qātaʿahu'llāh* and *kātaʿahu'llāh* are both substitutes (*badal*) for *qātalahu'llāhu*.[72] Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) explains, "It was a custom of the Arabs to say, 'may God fight him!' (*qātalahu'llāh*), but that would sound unseemly, and they would say instead *qātaʿahu'llāh* and *kātaʿahu'llāh*. Belonging to the same category are the expressions *wayḥak* and *waysak*, which are equivalent in meaning to 'Woe to you!' (*waylak*) but are less strong (*dūnahā*)."[73] In other words, *qātaʿahu'llāh* and *kātaʿahu'llāh* are euphemistic distortions of *qātalahu'llāh*, just as *wayḥak* and *waysak* are euphemistic distortions of *waylak*.

Constant usage led *qātalaka'llāh* to lose its original sense as a serious curse in some circumstances and to serve merely as an expressive interjection. As the medieval writers put it, the curse came to be used to express *taʿajjub* ("amazement" or "wonderment") for something that was either good or bad. In his commentary on Q 9:30, Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035) reports this interpretation on the authority of Abū'l-Walīd ʿAbd al-Malik b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767), an early Meccan authority who transmits from Abū Muḥammad ʿAṭā' b. Abī Rabāḥ (d. 114–115/732–734): *qātalahumu'llāhu wa-huwa bi-maʿnā'l-taʿajjub* ("'God fight them!' which indicates amazement").[74] Al-Ṭabarī states that the curses *qātalahumu'llāh* and *qutila* both have the same meaning, which is to convey amazement (*al-taʿajjub*).[75] Al-Qurṭubī reports, *wa-ʿādatu'l-ʿarab idhā taʿajjabū min shayʾin qālū qātalahu'llāhu mā aḥsanah wa-akhzāhu'llāhu mā azlamah* ("It is a custom of the Arabs that, when they are amazed at something, they say 'May God fight it,

70. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 10.438.

71. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 14.207.

72. Abū'l-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr al-Khazrajī, *Lisān al-ʿarab* (15 vols.; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1955–1956), 8.260, 360.

73. Ibid., 8.260.

74. Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī, *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, ed. Abū Muḥammad Ibn ʿĀshūr (10 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002), 5.34.

75. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 14.208.

how beautiful it is!' and 'May God disappoint it, how oppressive it is!'").[76] For instance, in his commentary on Q 9:30, one of the verses in which the curse *qātalahumu'llāh* appears, al-Thaʿlabī cites the poet Abū Saʿīd Abān b. Taghlib al-Kindī (d. 141/758), who used the phrase in a poem: *qātalahā'llāhu talḥānī wa-qad ʿalimat annī li-nafsī ifsādī wa-iṣlāḥī* ("May God fight her!—She blames me even though she knows that my ruin and my betterment are up to me alone").[77] The curse conveys consternation at her behavior rather than a wish for her death. Al-Qurṭubī adds another poetic citation from Abū Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Malik b. Qurayb al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 213/828): *yā qātala'llāhu laylā kayfa tuʃibunī wa-ukhbiru'l-nāsa annī lā ubālīhā* ("May God fight Laylā! How she captivates me, yet I tell everyone that I don't even notice her").[78] The function of the curse in these cases might be conveyed by the English "Damn!" or some weaker expression such as "Confound the woman!"

One use of this curse is attributed to ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb in a *ḥadīth* report recorded in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870). When he was informed that Samrah b. Jundub b. Hilāl al-Fazārī sold wine, he exclaimed: *qātala'llāhu samrah* ("May God fight Samrah!").[79] Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1449) explains that the curse should not be understood literally: *lam yurid ẓāhirahu bal hiya kalimah taqūluhā al-ʿarabu ʿinda irādati'l-zajr fa-qālahā fī ḥaqqihi taghlīzan ʿalayhi* ("He did not intend the plain meaning of the statement. Rather, this is an expression that the Arabs utter when they intend to upbraid someone, and he said it with regard to him in order to rebuke him harshly").[80] It is evident that curses serve pragmatic functions other than damnation or invoking retribution, such as reprimand (*tawbīkh*), rebuke (*zajr*), or denunciation (*inkār*), in addition to the expression of amazement (*taʿajjub*), as explained above.

The commentators provide several interpretations of the curse's literal meaning. The opinion attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās is that *qātalahumu'llāh* means *laʿanahumu'llāh* ("God damn them!"). This suggests not only that *qātala* and *qutila* do not express their literal meaning but also that they are generic verbs of imprecation, on a par with *laʿana*. Ibn al-Jawzī lists three traditional interpretations of *qātalahumu'llāh*: *laʿanahumu'llāh* ("may God damn them!") attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās; *qatalahumu'llāh* ("may God kill them") adopted by Abū ʿUbaydah (d. 209/824–825); and *ʿādāhumu'llāh* ("may God oppose

76. Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām*, 22.79.

77. Al-Thaʿlabī, *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, 5.34.

78. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān*, 10.176.

79. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-buyūʿ, bāb lā yudhābu shaḥm al-maytah wa-lā yubāʿu wadakuh*, 1; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-musāqāh, bāb taḥrīm bayʿ al-khamr wa'l-maytah wa'l-khinzīr wa'l-aṣnām*, 2.

80. Abū'l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. ʿAlī Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (13 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Rayyān li'l-Turāth, 1986), 4.485.

them!") adopted by Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/939).[81] While the literal meaning "may God fight them" is close to that of *ʿādāhum* ("may God oppose them!") the functional meaning appears closer to that of *laʿanahumu'llāh* ("may God damn them!") This is corroborated by many interpreters who gloss the curse as *laʿanahumu'llāh* without further comment. In *al-Mufradāt*, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 422/1031) defines the curse *qātalahumu'llāh* as *laʿanahumu'llāh* ("God damn them!") preferably, though he reports the meaning *qatalahum* ("may He kill them!") adopted by some authorities. In his view, *qātala*, being of the pattern *mufāʿalah* (Form III), indicates that one undertakes to fight God, but whoever fights God will surely be killed, and whoever tries to defeat God will surely be defeated, as evident in God's word, "Our host will verily be the victors" (Q Ṣāffāt 37:173).[82] This is essentially a theological rather than a linguistic interpretation: since God is omnipotent, if He fights someone, He will inevitably kill him.

Al-Ṭabarī cites experts in Arabic linguistic usage (*ahl al-maʿrifah bi-kalām al-ʿarab*) as arguing that in this case the pattern *fāʿala* (Form III) of the verb *qātala* is exceptional in that it means *qatalahu'llāh* ("may God kill him!") literally, and not "may God fight him!" as one would ordinarily expect. He cites the parallel expressions *shāqāhu'llāh* and *bāqāhu'llāh*, which both use Form III verbs but are held to mean *ashqāhu'llāh* ("may God make him wretched!") and *abqāhu'llāh* ("may God preserve him, grant him long life!") and not what a Form III verb usually denotes: an action that one performs on someone else but is at least potentially reciprocated, as in *ṣāraʿa* ("to wrestle"). Al-Ṭabarī cites as a possible parallel case as well the blessing *ʿāfāhu'llāh*, which means *aʿfāhu'llāh* ("may God give him health!").[83] In this case I would argue that the literal meaning is not actually *qatalahumu'llāh* ("may God kill them"), but rather, "God fight them!" Such unusual senses, including anthropomorphic descriptions of God as well as the personification of animals and inanimate objects, are common in curses in general.

While *qātalaka'llāhu* can occur as a free curse, it often occurs as a cognate curse retort, as shown by the following anecdotes. On the way from Iraq to Aleppo early in the fall of 354/965, the famous poet al-Mutanabbī was ambushed by the forces of an Arab chieftain whom he had lampooned in a sarcastic poem earlier that year. He was about to seek safety in flight when his servant asked how he could possibly retreat from danger, for he had uttered the immortal verse: *al-khaylu wa'l-laylu wa'l-baydāʾu taʿrifunī wa'l-sayfu wa'l-rumḥu*

81. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, 3.425.

82. Abū'l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1961), 393.

83. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 14.207–208.

wa'l-qirṭāsu wa'l-qalamu ("Horses, the night, and the desert know me, and the sword and the lance, so too the parchment and the pen!"). Thus shamed into proving his valor in battle, al-Mutanabbī turned to face his attackers and meet his demise, but not before berating his servant, *qataltanī qātalaka'llāh* ("You have killed me—may God fight you!").[84] Al-Mutanabbī's exclamation is a cognate curse: *qātalaka'llāh* ("may God fight you") echoes the root consonants *q-t-l* of the preceding statement, *qataltanī* ("you have killed me").

This was not an isolated rhetorical flourish on the part of the eloquent poet. A similar exclamation is recorded by Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) in *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*. After Khālid b. al-Walīd recounted how he had killed the Prophet's uncle Ḥamzah in battle, his interlocutor ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf scolded him, *yā khālid akhadhta bi-amri'l-jāhiliyyati qataltahum bi-ʿammika'l-fākih qātalaka'llāh* ("O Khālid, you have adopted the way of the Time of Ignorance and killed them in retaliation for your paternal uncle al-Fākih—may God fight you!").[85]

On one occasion the poet Dhū'l-Rummah (d. 117/735) had an ode describing his love for Mayy recited in front of her and the other women of her tribe. His reciter ʿUqbah b. Mālik al-Fazārī was interrupted when he reached the verse *idhā saraḥat min ḥubbi mayya sawāriḥun ʿani'l-qalbi ābathu bi-laylin ʿawāzibuhu* ("In the morning the worries caused by my love for Mayy leave my heart freely, like camels trotting out to graze, but at night, from far pastures, those distant camels return"). At that point, their witty hostess exclaimed to Mayy, *qataltīhi qātalaki'llāh* ("You have killed him—may God fight you!").[86] The fact that this structure, an instance of the verb *qatala* followed by the cognate curse *qātalaka'llāh*, occurs frequently in classical Arabic literature in similar linguistic and pragmatic contexts suggests that what a casual reader might view as an *ad hoc* rhetorical figure was actually a stylized, standard form in common Arabic speech.

Examination of the qur'ānic passages in which the expressions *qātalahumu'llāh* ("may God fight them") and *qutila* ("may they be killed") appear suggests that they are often used as paronomastic curses, something the qur'ānic commentaries I have examined fail to point out. The surprising aspect of this is that they seem to be echoing not instances of the tri-

84. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa'l-aʿlām*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmurī (53 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1989), 26.105.

85. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (3 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 2.880; Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-maghāzī, bāb qatl Ḥamzah b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib*.

86. Abū ʿAlī Ismāʿīl b. al-Qāsim al-Qālī, *Dhayl al-Amālī*, published with *al-Amālī* and *al-Nawādir* (2 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, n.d.), 2.124.

consonantal root *q-t-l* such as *qātalū*, *qatalū*, and so on, but rather instances of the tri-consonantal root *q-w-l*, forms derived from the verb "to say."

I. The first example is *qālati'l-yahūd… qātalahumu'llāh* (Q 9:30). In this case, the functional equivalent of the curse *qātalahumu'llāh* would be a notch down from the literal meaning, just as a curse like *lā abā laka* ("may you be bereft of a father") might be understood as "you sly dog!" In this case, something like "God confound them!" would be the correct level of invective, since the verse rebukes the Jews and the Christians for making heretical statements. At first glance the curse appears to recall the imperative *qātilū* in the preceding verse (Q 9:29). However, the lengths of the verses in question suggest instead that it responds to the forms of the verb *qāla* that occur earlier in the same verse: ***wa-qālati****'l-yahūdu ʿuzayru'bnu'llāh* ***wa-qālati****'l-naṣārā al-masīḥu'bnu'llāh dhalikā* ***qawluhum*** *bi-afwāhihim yuḍāhūna* ***qawla****'lladhīna kafarū min qablu* ***qātalahumu****'llāhu annā yuʾfakūn* ("The Jews ***have said*** that Ezra is the son of God, and the Christians ***have said*** that Christ is the son of God. That is ***their saying*** [i.e., what they said] with their mouths, imitating the ***saying*** of [i.e., what was said by] those who disbelieved of old. May God fight them! How are they deluded?!") (Q 9:30). Four forms derived from the verb *qāla*—*qālat* ("they said") (twice), *qawluhum* ("their saying"), *qawlu* ("the saying")—appear in quick succession, and they lead up to the optative *qātalahumu'llāh*. The structure suggests that *qātalahumu'llāh* is a paronomastic curse triggered by the preceding derivatives of the verb *qāla, yaqūlu* ("to say"). The paronomasia is not complete because the root consonants of *qāla* are *q-w-l*, while those of *qātalahum* are *q-t-l*. Nevertheless, they are quite close, and the *-t-* actually occurs twice in the verb *qālat*, making the paronomasia closer, although with metathesis. It is worth noting as well the occurrence of *qablu*, also with an additional *q* and *l*, in the word immediately preceding *qātalahum*, an additional flourish of paronomasia. The addition of *bi-afwāhihim* ("with their mouths") serves an emphatic function here, the reference to their physical bodies stressing the certainty and severity of the infraction, and leads into the curse, while calling attention to the physicality of their act of speaking.[87]

87. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1971), 201. As Paret notes, similar phrases—*bi-afwāhikum*, *bi-afwāhihim* "with your mouths," "with their mouths"—are often used to suggest a contradiction between outer statements and inner convictions (e.g., Q Āl ʿImrān 3:167; Q Tawbah 9:8; generally, the opposition is between "mouths" and *qulūb* "hearts" or *ṣudūr* "breasts").

As seen above, cognate curses occur in the Qur'ān in similar passages that denounce theologically incorrect or offensive statements: *qālati'l-yahūdu yadu'llāhi* ***maghlūlatun—ghullat*** *aydīhim wa-luʿinū bimā qālū* ("The Jews said, 'The hand of God is **shackled**'—May their hands **be shackled**, and may they be cursed for what they have said!"). The proximity of the cognates *maghlūlah* and *ghullat*, and other key terms in similar constructions, suggests that *qātilū* ("fight them") in the preceding verse, Q 9:29, is too far back to serve as the trigger of this particular curse. *Qātalahumu'llāh* is logically, as well as phonetically, a direct response to what the Jews and Christians have said.

II. A similar example occurs in the course of a description of the hypocrites: *wa-idhā raʾaytahum tuʿjibuka ajsāmuhum wa-in* ***yaqūlū*** *tasmaʿ li-****qawlihim*** *ka-annahum khushubun musannadatun yaḥsabūna kulla ṣayḥatin ʿalayhim humu'l-ʿadūwu faʾḥdharhum qātalahumu'llāhu annā yuʿfakūn* ("When you look at them, their exteriors please you, and if they **say** something, you listen to **what they say** [literally, "their saying"]. But they are like pieces of timber propped up, and they think that every cry is against them. They are the enemies, so beware of them. May God fight them! How are they deluded?!") (Q Munāfiqūn 63:4). Here one may interpret the curse *qātalahumu'llāh* as a response to *q-w-l* once again, in the phrase *wa-in yaqūlū tasmaʿ li-qawlihim* ("And if they say something, you listen to what they say"), the consonants in *qātalahum* echoing those in *yaqūlū* and *qawlihim*.

As mentioned above, the curse *qutila* ("may he be killed") occurs five times in the Qur'ān, and several of these instances may be interpreted as paronomastic curses as well. Commentators explain the meaning of the curse in various ways. In al-Thaʿlabī's view, all instances of *qutila* ("may he be killed") mean *luʿina* ("may he be damned!").[88] To Muḥammad b. Muslim Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741–742) is attributed the opinion that it means *ʿudhdhiba* ("may he be tormented").[89]

I. One example of *qutila* being used as a paronomastic curse retort occurs in the passage *wa'l-samāʾi dhāti'l-ḥubuk / innakum la-fī* ***qawlin mukhtalif*** */ yuʿfaku ʿanhu man ufik /* ***qutila****'l-kharrāṣūn* ("By the heaven full of paths / You are of divided opinion / He who is averse is

Here and in Q Nūr 24:15 and Aḥzāb 33:4, however, they serve to convey the truth and objective reality of oppositional statements.

88. Al-Thaʿlabī, *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, 5.34; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 22.399.

89. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 21.378.

turned away from it. / May the mongers of falsehood **be killed**!") (Q Dhāriyāt 51:7–10). One may argue that the verb *qutila* ("may he be killed") in the curse in verse 10 of this passage responds to the noun *qawl* ("opinion") in verse 8. This is not entirely certain; against this interpretation, one could argue that the oath in verse 7 and the following two verses form an integral unit, and that verse 10 begins a new, distinct section. This might be corroborated by the fact that the curse is in the third person, while the *qawl* is attributed to the second person. However, the change in person suggests a typical qur'ānic example of *iltifāt* (change of person for rhetorical effect) and the third person in verse 10 could easily refer to the second person in verse 8. The passage that begins in verse 10 is a commentary on the previous three verses, so a sharp break should not take place between verses 9 and 10. This particular curse is probably triggered by the *qawl mukhtalif* in verse 8, and it takes the particular form it does in order to create paronomasia.

II. Two other instances of *qutila* used as a paronomastic curse retort occur in adjacent verses (Q Muddaththir 74:19–20); the curse is repeated for emphasis. The commentaries identify the man being cursed as al-Walīd b. al-Mughīrah, an elder of Quraysh who was asked his opinion of the Prophet Muḥammad and, after careful reasoning and deliberation, pronounced the verdict that he was a wizard, an opinion reported in verses 24–25.[90] The trigger for the curse at first appears to be the verb *qaddar* ("to consider, estimate"). The passage reads, *innahu fakkara wa-qaddar / fa-qutila kayfa qaddar / thumma qutila kayfa qaddar* ("He considered and planned. May he be killed—How he planned! Again may he be killed—How he planned!") (Q 74:18–20). Here, the instances of the verbs *qutila* and *qaddara* share the initial root consonant *q*, and the second root consonants, the dentals *t* and *d*, resemble each other, as do the third root consonants, the liquids *r* and *l* (these often rhyme in the Qur'ān). While the phonetic match is not as close as that found in *q-t-l* > *q-w-l*, one may argue that the curse is paronomastic to a degree. A more compelling interpretation, however, is that these curses anticipate the statement that serves as the climax of the passage: *fa-qāla in hādhā illā siḥrun yu'thar / in hādhā illā qawlu'l-bashar* ("Then he said, 'This is nothing but magic transmitted. This is nothing but human speech'") (Q 74:24–25). The verbs *qutila* respond to *qāla* and *qawl* in that statement, for, as the ultimate verdict of the detractor identified as al-Walīd b. al-Mughīrah, it is the main

90. Al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 5.247.

idea the passage as a whole sets out to reject. That statement therefore represents the most logical trigger of the curse, even though the curse in this case anticipates the statement.

In several other cases, by contrast, *qutila* is not a paronomastic or cognate curse. The curse *qutila aṣḥābu'l-ukhdūd* ("May the Companions of the Trench be killed!") (Q 85:4) is not adjacent to any use of the verbs *qatala*, *qāla* or similar forms. The trench is a fiery pit into which victims, identified in the commentaries either as the Christian martyrs of Najran in 523 CE or the denizens of Hell, are burned. In the former case, the "Companions of the Trench" are the persecutors who have thrown the Christians into the pit; in the latter, the "Companions of the Trench" are the wrongdoers being burned.[91] Like other curses, it is sometimes interpreted as a report that they have in fact been killed. Al-Ṭabarī states that it is a declarative sentence meaning *al-nāru qatalathum* ("the fire killed them") instead of a curse.[92] Again, this interpretation appears to me untenable, and the interpretation of the verse as a curse would be in line with the other uses of *qutila* in the Qur'ān. Al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī provide a typological interpretation, whereby the unbelievers of Quraysh are compared to those earlier culprits. On this logic, al-Zamakhsharī states that it means *qutilat quraysh* ("may Quraysh be killed!") and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī paraphrases, *uqsimu anna kuffāra qurayshin mal'ūnūn* ("I swear that the unbelievers of Quraysh are damned!").[93]

Another example that is certainly not a cognate curse is *qutila'l-insānu mā akfarah* ("May man be killed! What an ingrate he is!") (Q ʿAbasa 80:17). Al-Qurṭubī remarks that this curse is used in Arabic to express amazement.[94] This is in keeping with the following exclamation *mā akfarahu*, which likewise expresses amazement, meaning, "How ungrateful he is!" No form of the verbs *qatala* or *qāla* occurs in the vicinity.

The expression *qātalaka'llāh* ("may God fight you!") is used as a paronomastic curse in the Qur'ān responding to forms of the verb *qāla*, and the same may be said of the curse *qutila* ("may he be killed"). That this usage reflects an ordinary Arabic speech genre on which the Qur'ān drew is corroborated, to some degree, by the pair of opening verses in a poem by the pre-Islamic poet ʿAntarah (d. *ca*. 608 CE).

91. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 505–506.

92. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 24.337.

93. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 4.199–200; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 31.117. Al-Rāzī adds that commentators have interpreted the phrase both as a curse and as a report, and that the Companions of the Fire could be the ones killed in the fire or the killers themselves. Ibid., 31.119.

94. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li'l-aḥkām*, 10.176.

a-lā qātala'llāhu'l-ṭulūla'l-bawāliyā / wa-qātala dhikrāka'l-sinīna'l-khawāliyā
wa-qawlaka li'l-shay'i'lladhī lā tanāluhu / idhā mā huwa'ḥlawlā a-lā layta dhā liyā

May God fight the effaced traces of the beloved's campsite! And may He fight your memories of bygone years!
And your saying to the thing that you cannot attain, when it appears sweet, "If only I had that!"[95]

Like many of the qur'ānic commentators, the compiler of ʿAntarah's *Dīwān*, Abū Zakarīyā Yaḥyā b. ʿAlī al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī (d. 503/1109), explains that *qātala'llāh* is used to express amazement (*taʿajjub*).[96] Again, a functional equivalent in English might be "Damn them!" Al-Tibrīzī paraphrases: *qātalahā'llāhu mā ajlabahā li'l-aḥzān* ("May God fight them!—How they stir up sadness!"). The point that al-Tibrīzī does not make is that the curse *qātala'llāhu* is triggered by—anticipates, to be precise in this case—the noun *qawlaka* ("your saying") in the second verse. This is out of the usual order, but as pointed out above in connection with Q 74:19–25, a cognate curse may be uttered in anticipation. One may interpret the two verses as the inversion of an ordinary statement such as: *qulta layta dhā lī—qātalaka'llāhu* ("You said, 'If only I had that'—May God fight you!"). The fact that this figure of speech occurs both in the Qur'ān and in the poetry of ʿAntarah suggests that both are drawing on an established figure in ordinary speech. In other words, in pre-Islamic Arabic usage, *qātalaka'llāhu* likely served as a cognate curse triggered not only by uses of the verb *qatala*, *yaqtulu* but also by uses of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*.

Suggestive parallels may be sought in the modern Arabic dialects, in which particular paronomastic curses respond to uses of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*, *qawlan*. In Negev Arabic, the curse that commonly retorts to the verb *gāl*, *yigūl* is *allāh yigillak* ("May God reduce you [to misery]!") In Egyptian Arabic, the corresponding curses that respond to *ʾāl*, *yiʾūl* are *ʾallak il-ʿill* ("May want reduce you [to misery]!") and the extended version, *ʾallak il-ʿill wi-taʿab is-sirr* ("May want and mental anguish reduce you [to misery]!"). Both curse retorts are based on the root transformation *q-w-l* > *q-l-l*. These curse retorts use the verb *gall* or *ʾall*, from classical Arabic *ʾaqalla*, *yuqillu* ("to reduce") and the noun *al-ʿill*, from classical Arabic *al-qull* ("lack, want, poverty") to echo the root consonants of the key term in statements that may have triggered this response, such as Egyptian *m-ana ʾult-i-lu* ("But I told him!"), *m-ana ʾult-ilak* ("But I told you!"), *ʾul-li* ("Tell me!"), and so on.

While some cognate curses preserve the root consonants of the initial trigger exactly, as in *yadu'llāhi maghlūlatun—ghullat aydīhim* ("God's hand is

95. Abū Zakarīyā Yaḥyā b. ʿAlī al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī, *Sharḥ Dīwān ʿAntarah*, ed. Majīd Ṭarād (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1993), 214.

96. Al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī, *Sharḥ Dīwān ʿAntarah*, 214.

shackled—may their hands be shackled!") and in Egyptian *nām—nāmit ʿalēk ḥēṭa* ("Lie down"—"May a wall lie down on top of you!") or *iftaḥ—fataḥ fī rāsak ṭāʾa* ("Open"—"May [God] open up a window in your head!"), a number involve a phonetic distortion, so that exact cognate paronomasia is not maintained. This is perhaps to be expected with the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*, since it is somewhat difficult to come up with a violent or devastating meaning using the same exact verb "to say."

Phonetic distortion is fairly common in cognate curses. Such phonetic distortions occur only rarely in polite blessing responses, which tend to preserve the tri-consonantal root intact.[97] It is clear, though, that the paronomastic curses form part of the same genre as the exact cognate curses. They are used in the same way and are seen to have the same effect. For example, in Egyptian Arabic, one curse retort to *imshi* ("go away!") and its cognates is *mishyit ʿalēk maṣarīnak* ("May your intestines walk on you!"), meaning, "may you get diarrhea/dysentery!" In this case, the key optative verb in the curse, *mishyit*, is an exact cognate of *imshi*, both having the root consonants *m-sh-y*. However, another common curse retort to the same trigger is *gak mashash fi-rukabak* ("May you get cattle-rot in your knees!"), in which the root consonants *m-sh-y* are transformed into *m-sh-sh*, so strictly cognate paronomasia is not maintained. Nevertheless, there is no understanding that the two curses are substantially different in verbal category or in rhetorical effect.[98] It is argued here that the curse *qātalaka'llāhu* functions in a similar way. It belongs to the general class of cognate curses that include *yadu'llāhi maghlūlah—ghullat aydīhim*… and *inṣarafū—ṣarafa'llāhu qulūbahum*, but with the added feature that it distorts the tri-consonantal root of the initial statement responding to uses of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu* ("to say").

97. Stewart, "Impoliteness Formulae," 333–334.

98. In his erudite and thoroughly documented article "'Paronomasie': Eine Begriffsverwirrung," Werner Diem argues that general paronomasia (*jinās* or *tajnīs*) must be distinguished strictly and carefully from cognate paronomasia (*ishtiqāq*), and that the latter should properly be labeled with a different term altogether, such as *figura etymologica*. He also argues that paronomasia refers properly to cases in which there is a semantic difference between the two terms that show phonetic similarity. While there may be some benefit to noticing these differences for rhetorical analysis in general, examination of the genres of cognate blessing responses and cognate curse retorts shows that expressions which are indisputable and common members of the genre show both semantic similarity and semantic difference, and both strict repetition of root consonants and incomplete or partial repetition of root consonants. Both the semantic distortions and the phonetic distortions tend to be more prominent in curses than they are in blessings.

Conclusion

The qur'ānic examples discussed above draw on, and at the same time provide testimony of, a historical speech genre found in pre-Islamic Arabic. Scattered evidence attests to the prevalence of cognate paronomasia in Old Arabic in general and in curses in particular. Abū ʿAlī Ismāʿīl b. al-Qāsim al-Qālī (d. 356/967), an expert on Arabic linguistic usage and old Arab lore, records a collection of "curses of the Arabs" in *Dhayl al-Amālī*, and many of them make use of paronomasia, including cognate paronomasia.[99] Several paronomastic curses invoke a man's loss of wealth or herds of camels: *māluhu ghālat-hu ghūl* ("May a ghoul seize his herds"); *shaʿabat-hu shaʿūb* ("May the Separating One [i.e., Death] separate them"); *walaʿat-hu'l-walūʿ* ("May the Greedy One snatch them away"). Others refer to death indirectly: *zāla zawāluhu* ("May his cessation pass"); *zīla zawīluhu* ("May his cessation be made to vanish"); *ʿīla mā ʿālahu* ("May what removed him be removed"). Quoting Abū ʿUbaydah Maʿmar b. al-Muthannā (d. 209/824–825), al-Qālī gives the meaning of this last curse as *uhlika halākuhu* ("May his destruction be destroyed"). Abū ʿUbaydah explains this as a type of euphemism by indirection: *arāda al-duʿā' ʿalayhi fadaʿā ʿalā al-fiʿl* ("He meant to curse him, but then cursed the act itself").[100] Still others include *ḥattahu'llāhu ḥatta'l-baramah* ("May God crush him as the fruit of the mustard tree [*arāk*] is crushed") and *lā tabiʿa lahu zilfun zilfan* ("May not one hoof belonging to him follow another hoof"); *thalila thalaluhu* ("May his destruction be demolished") and *athalla'llāhu thalalahu* ("May God demolish his destruction").[101] In all cases, the paronomasia performs an emphatic function, while at the same time serving to create humor. In many cases, the paronomastic expression is a euphemism that avoids direct mention of death. A paronomastic tour de force occurs in the compound curse *sulla wa-shulla wa-ghulla wa-ulla* ("May he suffer consumption, become crippled, be thrown in chains, and get transfixed on a spear"). One indication of the importance of linguistic form in such expressions is that the verb "may he become crippled or paralyzed" is ordinarily *shalla*, but has been altered by attraction to the other verbs in the curse (*li-muzāwajat al-kalām*).[102]

The cognate curse is one of a number of rhetorical features of the Qur'ān that are used not just for emphasis but also for humorous effect, and it resembles in this aspect the many ironic inversions of the text, such as *bashshirhum biʿadhābin alīm* ("Give them the glad tidings of a painful punishment!") (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:21; Tawbah 9:34; Inshiqāq 84:24) and *dhuq innaka al-ʿazīzu'l-ḥakīm*

99. Al-Qālī, *Dhayl al-Amālī*, 2.57–62.
100. Ibid., 2.57–58.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.

("So taste [hellfire], for you are the Powerful and Wise!") (Q Dukhān 44:49). Cognate curses continue to serve this function in classical Arabic literature, including Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ's (d. 255/869) *Book of Misers*, in which a host upbraids his guest for not sharing the bread at a dinner: *mā laka waylaka lā taqṭaʿhu baynahum qaṭaʿa'llāhu awṣālak* ("Why, woe be to you, don't you cut it [the bread] up among them—may God cut off your limbs!").[103] They also serve this function in modern Arabic literature, in the works of such authors as Yūsuf Idrīs and Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs.[104]

The example of the cognate curse is one among many indications that the Qurʾān draws on pre-Islamic Arabic speech genres. As Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī (d. 466/1073–1074) states in his rhetorical manual *Sirr al-faṣāḥah*: *inna'l-qurʾāna unzila bi-lughati'l-ʿarabi wa-ʿalā ʿurfihim wa-ʿādatihim* ("The Qurʾān was revealed in the languages of the Arabs and according to their usage and custom"). He intends by this statement to refer to their linguistic customs in particular, which include the formal conventions of Arabic speech genres. Investigation of the Qurʾān with an eye to such conventions may reveal aspects of the scriptural text that have escaped the notice of scholars while at the same time throwing light on pre-Islamic Arabic usage. All such investigations are made difficult by the paucity of sources that date to the early years of Islamic history that might reliably purport to reveal the conventions of pre-Islamic Arabic usage, so that one must rely on later evidence and a presumption of linguistic continuity. Nevertheless, many commentators accepted that some such continuity indeed existed, so that the medieval exegetes were able to identify specific features of *kalām al-ʿarab* ("the speech of the Arabs") with confidence and to draw on such understanding for interpretation of the Qurʾān.

103. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Al-Bukhalāʾ* (Beirut: Dār al-Hilāl, 1998), 83.

104. See Stewart, "Impoliteness Formulae," 327, 346–347; idem, review of Woidich and Landau (ed. and trans.), *Arabisches Volkstheater*, 190–192. In modern literary works, the appearance of cognate curses also serves to mark the speaker as belonging to a low socio-economic level or to indicate a low-class urban or rural setting.

JIQSA 2 (2017): 89–109

DESTABILIZING GENDER, REPRODUCING MATERNITY: MARY IN THE QUR'ĀN*

KECIA ALI

Abstract

The Qur'ān tells Mary's story in extended passages in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (Q 3) and Sūrat Maryam (Q 19). These stories have been interpreted to emphasize sameness between men and women and prove qur'ānic gender egalitarianism on the one hand, and to illustrate the qur'ānic valuing of female, especially maternal, experience on the other. This essay proposes a third tack, highlighting queerness. Focusing on Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, this article suggests new avenues for thinking about gender, family, and society in the Qur'ān. In situating Mary in a semi-genealogical prophetic lineage and a believing community, qur'ānic verses by turns affirm and unsettle binary gender constructions and disrupt heteronormative reproductivity. Oscillating between highlighting Mary's femaleness and likening her to prophetic and pious males, the text offers rich notions of gender, kinship, and power. A queer reading of Mary poses certain dangers but also offers a way out of certain feminist impasses by rejecting a totalizing narrative.

* I have worked on this essay for several years and owe thanks to numerous people. An early, brief attempt to grapple with the theme of mothers and daughters in scripture for *Vox Feminarum* (2003) was my first pass at the story of Mary and her mother. Michael Birkel prompted me to think further about these issues as we talked through a pericope from Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, a discussion reflected in his *Qur'an in Conversation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014). I presented various iterations of this material at a symposium on maternity at Fordham University (2013) organized by Kathryn Kueny; at the inaugural meeting of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (2013); at the Theorizing Islam and Gender conference at Penn State University (2014) organized by Gabeba Baderoon, Jon Brockopp, Nina Hoel, and Fatima Seedat; and at the panel "Sacred Troubling Texts" organized by Roberta Sabbath at the American Comparative Literature Association (2016). Shawkat Toorawa read a draft and offered useful suggestions as did two anonymous readers for *JIQSA*. When the article was nearing completion, amina wadud, Aysha Hidayatullah, and Jerusha Tanner read it and suggested important refinements. I dedicate this article to Seemi Ghazi, who recited Sūrat Maryam for me before my daughter Shaira's difficult birth and again, sixteen years later, over her too-early grave.

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441//jiqsa.2.2017.a005

Keywords

Mary, exegesis, *tafsīr*, gender, feminism, embodiment, pregnancy, queer, Sūrat Āl ʿImrān, Sūrat Maryam

Introduction

It is often said that Mary (Maryam) is unique among the Qurʾān's female characters. Her story, told primarily through extended passages in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān (Q 3) and Sūrat Maryam (Q 19), lends itself to three interpretive trajectories. One approach, taken mostly by Muslim feminists, emphasizes *sameness* between men and women, noting Mary's similarity to male figures as evidence of qurʾānic gender egalitarianism and the potential for women to fulfill characteristically male roles, such as that of prophet. A second strategy, found in some scholarly as well as pious works, focuses on essentialized *difference* between men and women, insisting on qurʾānic sensitivity to women's gendered and embodied experience. In narrating Mary's pregnancy, labor, and delivery, qurʾānic discourse affirms the sacredness and power of biologically female and specifically maternal experiences; it invests childbearing with value in a way that places it parallel to, though distinct from, prophecy.

In this essay, I propose a third tack, highlighting *queerness.* Applied to theology, the term "queer" has sometimes meant theology that centers queer people and their needs, in tandem with liberation theology's focus on marginalized people. I focus on its related but distinct sense, derived from queer theory, of undoing binaries and unsettling taken-for-granted categories, especially those that pertain to sex, sexuality, and gender. Scholars of Judaism and Christianity have drawn on queer theoretical tools to engage scripture. Writing about Torah interpretation, Jay Michaelson lays out its basic assumptions:

> In queer theory, gender and sexual dimorphisms are social constructions that invariably efface difference, administer power to the powerful, and subject the weak/disfavored to the rule of the strong/favored. Dyads such as them/us, black/white, and female/male are inexact, indeed incorrect, simplifications of actual experience, and they invariably subordinate one side to the other. Many contemporary philosophers have argued that even the basic dualisms of self/other and presence/absence contain within them the seed of oppression, marginalization, and subjugation; as soon as we divide, we begin to conquer.[1]

1. Jay Michaelson, "It's the Purity, Stupid: Reading Leviticus in Context. *Parashat Metzora* (Leviticus 14:1–15:33)," in Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser, and David Schneer (eds.), *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 145–150, 148. Michaelson cautions, however, that to

Queer theoretical interventions, then, have relevance for social life: challenging the presumed coherence and sacred nature of existing oppressive norms allows other forms of being and relating to emerge and flourish. Such flourishing is central to the work of Christian thinkers, including Marcella Althus-Reid, whose germinal *Indecent Theology* illuminates connections between the ways Christians approach the Bible and its major figures—including Mary—and the ethical and theological resources available to queer and marginalized Christians.[2]

Queer theory and theologies have complicated, sometimes vexed, relationships to feminist theory and theologies. Insofar as feminist thinkers challenge male dominance by centering and valuing women and female experiences, queer theory's insistence on undoing the dominant gender binary can be perceived as threatening: how do you center women if "woman" is just a construct? (Similar questions have vexed academic debates over Women's Studies versus Gender Studies; many institutions, recognizing the interconnectedness of the subjects, now have Women's and Gender Studies programs.) However, queer emphasis on the constructed, contingent, continually shifting meanings attached to "woman," "female," and "feminine" have been taken up, productively, for feminist liberation projects.

While there has been a good deal of gender-focused interpretation of Muslim texts, little scholarship has drawn on queer theory. This article seeks to bridge that gap, using queer theoretical tools to suggest new avenues for thinking about gender, family, and society in the Qur'ān. I focus on Sūrat Āl ʿImrān, which recounts Mary's own gestation and birth, her temple service, and her role in inspiring Zachariah (Zakariyyā) to ask God for goodly progeny, resulting in the birth of John (Yaḥyā), which preceded the annunciation of Jesus (ʿIsā) to Mary. In situating Mary in a semi-genealogical prophetic lineage and a believing community, qur'ānic verses by turns affirm and unsettle binary gender constructions and disrupt heteronormative reproductivity. Oscillating between highlighting Mary's femaleness and likening her to prophetic and pious males, the text offers rich notions of gender, kinship, and power. A queer reading of Mary poses certain dangers but also offers a way out of certain feminist impasses precisely because it refuses a totalizing narrative.[3]

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value boundary blurring and "transgressive sexuality," and to contest the fixity of all categories, is a problem "if Judaism sets itself against a (real or imagined) 'other' that sacralizes the liminal."

2. Marcella Althus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2000).

3. Aysha Hidayatullah, in *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), has given a significant account of those impasses and signaled possible new directions for inquiry. The current vibrant and contentious state of Muslim women's scriptural interpretation emerges in the *JFSR* roundtable "Feminism and

Modern scholars, Muslim and otherwise, have investigated the qur'ānic Mary. Some explore influences or resonances with canonical and apocryphal biblical texts as well as other Near Eastern stories, including the Gospel of Luke and the *Protevangelium of James*.[4] My approach to the text is literary rather than historical. I set aside qur'ānic composition and redaction to focus on the extant text. Rather than looking at gaps, inconsistencies, or seeming contradictions as evidence of influences, precursors, or parallels, I treat the important divergences between the Mary who appears in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān and the Mary who appears in Sūrat Maryam as grounds for a literarily and theologically fruitful instability.[5] In this sense, my work complements scholarship on Mary that focuses on intra-qur'ānic dynamics of each *sūrah* as an organic unity,[6] and on the commentarial tradition.[7]

Scholarship on Mary has often highlighted Sūrat Maryam.[8] Shawkat Toorawa's translation of the *sūrah* attends particularly to linguistic parallels and word roots.[9] Aish Geissinger has analyzed the "subversive" nature

Islam: Exploring the Boundaries of Critique," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32 (2016): 111–151. The roundtable includes a lead essay and final statement from Asma Barlas and responses from me, Karen Bauer, amina wadud, Hidayatullah, Fatima Seedat, and YaSiin Rahmaan.

4. Consult, for instance, Suleiman A. Mourad, "Mary in the Qur'ān: A Reexamination of Her Presentation," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 163–174, as well as the works cited in Angelika Neuwirth, "Foreword," in Hosn Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an: A Literary Reading* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), xiii–xviii, xiii, n. 2. Abboud, *Mary*, discusses the *Protevangelium* at 115–128.

5. Abboud posits compatibility between Muslim belief in the divine status of the qur'ānic text and the obvious existence of textual parallels outside the Qur'ān, suggesting that intertextuality functions to highlight the significance of qur'ānic choices. See *Mary in the Qur'an*, 111.

6. Angelika Neuwirth, "The House of Abraham and the House of Amram: Genealogy, Patriarchal Authority, and Exegetical Professionalism," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 499–531.

7. Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 67–82; Kristen Zahra Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qur'ān in Classical Islam* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 97–109.

8. This is especially true for non-specialist engagement with Mary. See, e.g., Chapter 5 of Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), "The Heroine of the Qur'ān and the Black Madonna" (67–79).

9. Shawkat M. Toorawa, "Sūrat Maryam (Q 19): Lexicon, Lexical Echoes, English Translation," *JQS* 13 (2011): 25–78. On Toorawa's translation, and for alternate renderings of portions of Sūrat Maryam, consult Bruce B. Lawrence, *The* Koran *in English: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 117–121.

of Mary's labor and delivery of Jesus.[10] Leyla Ozgur Alhassen treats the intertwined themes of family, signs, and secrets in Q 19:1–58.[11] Scholars have noted the parallels in the *sūrah* between the births of Jesus and John, and the equally striking parallels between their parents, Mary and Zachariah.[12] Sūrat Maryam's primacy as the locus for qur'ānic discussions of Jesus (and Mary) is obvious in the Islamic Society of North America's publication in pamphlet form, with a short introductory essay, of the chapter in its entirety.[13]

Although scholars have devoted relatively less attention to the extended account of Mary in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān, "one cannot but pay attention to the fact that there is more than one image of Mary in the text."[14] Angelika Neuwirth and Hosn Abboud have explored Sūrat Āl ʿImrān's theologically-motivated Medinan "re-reading" of the Meccan Sūrat Maryam.[15] Neuwirth's exploration of the "House of Amram" (i.e., ʿImrān) as a matrilineal (though patriarchally-named) competitor to the "House of Abraham" foregrounds maternal lineage and female power, as it "historicizes" the "mythic" Mary presented in Sūrat Maryam.[16] Abboud's literary reading addresses the internal logic of each treatment of Mary and its biblical/apocryphal intertexts.

Other recent scholarship demonstrates the complexity and heterogeneity of qur'ānic discourses on maternity, masculinity, and prophets. Using insights

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10. Aisha Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an: Rereading Subversive Births," in Roberta Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 379–392.

11. Leyla Ozgur Alhassen, "A Structural Analysis of *Sūrat Maryam*, Verses 1–58," *JQS* 18 (2016): 92–116.

12. Geissinger explores the parallels between "Zachariah's story" and "Mary's story" ("Mary in the Qur'an," 383–384, with a handy table); Toorawa refers to the "account of Zachariah/John at verses 2–15 and the account of Mary/Jesus at 16–33" ("Sūrat Maryam," 26).

13. *The Story of Mary and Jesus from the Qur'an* (Plainfield, IN: Amana Publications, 1989).

14. Neuwirth, "Foreword," xvi.

15. Angelika Neuwirth, "Mary and Jesus: Counterbalancing the Biblical Patriarchs. A Re-reading of *Sūrat Maryam* (Q. 19) in *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān* (Q. 3)," in Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014); Neuwirth posits "a double religious-political purpose" for the re-reading in "House of Abraham," 505. For Abboud (*Mary in the Qur'an*, 6), the verses on Mary in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān "seem to embark on the task of interpreting already delivered themes from *Sūrat Maryam*." Mustansir Mir has written about plot, character, and irony operative within Sūrat Yūsuf. For an overview of his literary approach, consult Mir, "Some Aspects of Narration in the Qur'an," in Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes*, 93–106. Abboud (5, nos. 16–18) offers additional resources for thinking about literary approaches to the Qur'ān.

16. Neuwirth, "House of Abraham," 506.

from gender and sexuality studies, scholarship on Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and other biblical figures has showcased the multiple registers and variations in qur'ānic accounts of prophets.[17] Amanullah De Sondy explores passages on Adam, Joseph, Jesus, and Muḥammad to demonstrate that no single qur'ānic model of masculinity or the normative family exists.[18] Kathryn Kueny illustrates the multiple ways in which qur'ānic passages discuss creation and reproduction, gender and generativity; she shows how human language and concepts insufficiently capture the full reality of divine engagement in the world.[19] My exploration of Mary's story, especially as told in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān, corroborates these observations, even as it suggests further destabilization of gender norms in the text.

Sameness

One way of approaching Mary's story is to note how often she appears as like or a peer to men. The qur'ānic text mentions Mary in conjunction with Jesus on numerous occasions (e.g., Q Mu'minūn 23:50) as well as in the company of other (righteous) men. Rather than being among "devoutly obedient" women—*qānitāt*, which has a particular resonance in the Qur'ān, appearing in the context of marital relationships (Q Nisā' 4:34)—Mary is "among the *qānitīn*," those people or men who show *qunūt*, devout obedience (Q Taḥrīm 66:12); thus, the only specific woman identified as having *qunūt* has no husband.[20] The Qur'ān also applies the term *qānit* to the prophet Abraham

17. Consult, for instance, Mahdi Tourage, "The Erotics of Sacrifice in the Qur'anic Tale of Abel and Cain," in *International Journal of Zizek Studies* 5 (2011), http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/432; and, for an exploration of how such narratives are deployed, Karen G. Ruffle, "An Even Better Creation: The Role of Adam and Eve in Shi'i Narratives about Fatima al-Zahra," in *JAAR* 81 (2013): 791–819.

18. De Sondy's *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* shows that these figures do not conform to a single model of what it means to be an exemplary Muslim (i.e., submissive to God) man. The story of Jesus goes even further than the others in rejecting or bypassing heteropatriarchal social norms: "Jesus' life begins and ends in circumstances that defy every social and scientific norm that might support notions of a nuclear family or the roles found within one"; although "Muḥammad and Jesus are similar in the sense that they have no father role models in their lives," Jesus also violates conventional standards for being born, partnering, procreating, and dying. See Amanullah De Sondy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 116.

19. Kathryn M. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), esp. Chapter 1, "On Wombs, Women, and the Hand of God: The Beginning of Life in the Qur'an," 19–49.

20. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the qur'ānic text are mine,

(Q Naḥl 16:121). In another parallel to a male prophet, Mary is a "truthful woman (*ṣiddīqah*)" (Q Mā'idah 5:75) just as Joseph is a "truthful man" (*ṣiddīq*) (Q Yūsuf 12:46).[21] Sūrat Maryam makes parallels to (male) prophets when it commands readers to "Mention Mary in the book" (v. 16), as it commands mention of Abraham (v. 41), Moses (v. 51), Ishmael (v. 54), and Idris (v. 56).

Like men (prophets and others) Mary is named in the qur'ānic text.[22] As Mona Siddiqui observes, "In the Qur'ān only Moses, Abraham, and Noah are mentioned by name more frequently than Mary."[23] Other women are indicated by relational terms: Mary's mother is a woman or wife of Amram; Moses' mother and sister are both referred to in terms of their relation to him, as are Adam, Noah, and Zachariah's wives. Even the Queen of Sheba has a title, not a name.[24] Mary is "sister of Aaron" once (Q Maryam 19:28), but more often she is called by name. Contemporary women interpreters consider Mary's naming especially significant. Asma Lamrabet deems the

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drawing on various interpretations and translations. The translation "devoutly obedient," now common, was first used by Abdullah Yusuf Ali in 1937 (see Bruce Lawrence, *The* Koran *in English*, 101). The Qur'ān's use of the feminine plural of *qānit* in Q 4:34, a verse usually understood as inscribing male authority, particularly marital authority, is noteworthy. It reads, in part: "Righteous women are *qānitāt*, protecting the unseen in accordance with what God has guarded." Premodern commentators on this verse typically glossed *qānitāt* as "obedient," "obedient to God and their husbands," or even simply "obedient to their husbands." See Kecia Ali, "Obedience and Disobedience in Islamic Discourses," in Suad Joseph et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures* (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 5.309–313. The most important recent publications in an extensive body of literature on Q Nisā' 4:34 include Ayesha Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence in the Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Karen Bauer, *Gender Hierarchy in the Qur'ān: Medieval Interpretations, Modern Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

21. Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 155 notes this parallel.

22. Notably, a *sūrah* is named for her; this is an honor (otherwise) reserved for prophets (Muḥammad, Noah, Luqmān, Jonah, Joseph, Abraham, and Hūd). One can wonder whether those who titled the *sūrah*s considered her a prophet.

23. Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus,* 151. Note, though, that many of these instances include her name as part of Jesus' name. On naming and namelessness generally, consult Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 52.

24. On the Queen of Sheba and her exemplary fulfillment of the typically male role of leader, consult Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 38–42, and Asma Lamrabet, *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading*, trans. Myriam Francois-Cerrah (Markfield, UK: Kube Publishers, 2016), 25–35. The Qur'ān also refers to pharaoh(s) by title rather than name, suggesting that gender may be irrelevant when it is the leadership role that is at stake.

fact that Mary is named in scripture "undeniable evidence of her proximity to God!"[25]

Moreover, Mary unsettles patriarchal naming conventions in a more fundamental way. Jesus is "'Īsā ibn Maryam" (Q Maryam 19:34), that is, "Jesus the son of Mary."[26] As Abboud puts it, "she is named, and has the power to name."[27] The matronymic reinforces the theological point that Jesus has no human father and also serves as a reminder that Mary fulfills a role typically reserved for men.

Like (other) prophets, Mary communicates with the Divine. Like Moses's mother, who was "inspired" by God to save her child by casting him afloat in the river (Q Ṭā-hā 20:38–39; Q Qaṣaṣ 28:7), Mary receives direct communication from God, through an angel or otherwise. Receiving *waḥy*—which Amira Mittermaier calls "a dense signifier and a highly charged term"—made Mary a prophet in the eyes of a small minority of medieval commentators.[28] These scholars were not interested in whether women could be prophets but rather, as Maribel Fierro points out, in whether someone who received a particular kind of inspiration from God was a prophet; the inclusion of women was a by-product, not the desired end result.[29]

Modern discussions of Mary's potential prophethood consider the impact her being considered a prophet would have on other women. Palwasha Lena Kakar's interrogative "Is She a Prophet?" emphasizes the potential importance for women of there being a female prophet: she would serve as model for greater female potential, which men would also have to recognize.[30] (Kakar ultimately withholds any verdict on whether or not Mary actually was a prophet.) The most extended argument for Mary's prophetic status in recent times comes from Hosn Abboud, who surveys the Andalusian and "Eastern" exegetical arguments for and against women's capacity to receive *waḥy*, finding the former convincing and the latter mere reflections of "pre-

25. Lamrabet, *Women in the Qur'an*, 71.

26. Or *al-Masīḥ ibn Maryam* (Q Nisā' 4:171, Q Mā'idah 5:75).

27. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 1. Note, too, that it is Mary's mother who names her (Q Āl 'Imrān 3:36).

28. Amira Mittermaier offers this characterization of *waḥy* in her ethnography of dreams and dream interpretation in contemporary Egypt, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 134. On the view that Mary was a prophet, see Maribel Fierro, "Women as Prophets in Islam," in Manuela Marín and Randi Deguilhem (eds.), *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 183–198; Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 130–144; Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 77; Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries*, 99.

29. See Fierro, "Women as Prophets in Islam."

30. Palwasha Lena Kakar, "Is She a Prophet?: Maryam, Mother of Jesus," *Azizah* 3 (2003): 14–18.

conceived ideas" about women's limitations.[31] Such prejudices led the exegete al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) to opine that "the angels spoke orally to Maryam as a miracle to Zakariyya."[32]

Still, beyond patriarchal presuppositions, there are scriptural roadblocks. To consider any woman a prophet would clash with the seemingly clear sense of the qur'ānic declaration that "We have only sent men prior to you" (*mā arsalnā min qablika illā rijāl*) (Q Yūsuf 12:109). One counterargument, which Abboud adopts, is that this passage refers to messengers (*rusul*) only, and does not disqualify a woman from being a prophet (*nabī*).[33] Another argument takes *rijāl* to refer to human beings in contrast to angels, rather than males in contrast to females.[34]

Like Geissinger, Abboud emphasizes the way that Mary serves as a model for Muḥammad. She shows the close parallels between the story of Mary's heroic journey told in Sūrat Maryam and Muḥammad's reported struggles during the Meccan period, recalling that Sūrat Maryam is Meccan. Abboud enumerates the parallels between the two, and the resonance of Mary's story with the "basic model or prototype" of prophets who are rejected before being vindicated.[35] The implication is clear: Mary is at least as much a role model for Muḥammad as (other) qur'ānic prophets.

Mary's status as a (potential) prophet, on a par with and considered in the company of pious males, caps the sameness argument. It does not question the categories of male and female so much as assert that for Mary, the differentiation between them is meaningless or even that Mary is "beyond gender."[36] Certainly, some material in the Qur'ān fails to comment specifically

31. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 138. Lamrabet briefly mentions Mary's status as prophet—as well as "model of spiritual perfection"—in *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran: quelle egalite?* (Paris: Albouraq, 2012), 37, also 18; she discusses Mary at length in *Women in the Qur'an*, 70–89.

32. As quoted in Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 136.

33. Ibid., 143; see also, Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 155. On the utility of this distinction, consult Zakyi Ibrahim, "A Prophet or a Messenger: How Bona Fide a Qur'anic Concept?," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 26 (2009): 20–46.

34. Yet as Azizah al-Hibri points out (personal communication, September 2016), one must ask: why not a gender-neutral term? On *rijāl* as "gender-neutral" outside the context of prophethood, see Lamrabet, *Femmes et hommes*, 59. It would be interesting to explore the relationship between the binaries men/women and human/angel, which seem to set woman and angel as the parallels. Gendered binaries (spirit/flesh, heaven/earth) typically associate the masculine with the superior element; the likening of women to angels in this case retains this attribution of more value to the masculine element to the extent that human beings are valued over angels.

35. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 144–146. See also Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an."

36. So suggested a respondent to an early version of this paper.

on Mary's gender. Yet these references situate her within the unmarked category of male as they compare her to or describe her in ways that parallel men, including the prophets Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ishmael, and Idris. One might best consider this a liberal-egalitarian interpretation, focused on Mary as an exceptional individual. Perhaps refusing to recognize the salience of gender is the equivalent of contemporary American "color-blind racism": by failing to acknowledge persistent, pervasive discriminatory elements in social life, it individualizes and thereby exceptionalizes gendered structural realities.[37] Paradoxically, in insisting that Mary symbolizes or exemplifies the unlimited possibilities for women, the sameness or gender-oblivious interpretation illustrates the immensity of the boundary that (normally) exists: only a woman not subject to ordinary constraints can attain such an august rank.[38]

Difference

Another interpretive trajectory highlights Mary's femininity. Mary is, of course, exceptional, but not because she alone among women is like or of equal worth to men. Rather, her extraordinary virtue in her divinely-imposed travails stands as the pinnacle of specifically feminine accomplishment. Rather than focusing on Mary's individual characteristics, affirming her ability to transcend limitations of gender, or presuming their irrelevance when moral excellence is at stake, those who emphasize difference portray her primarily in the company of women or as differentiated from men. What greater affirmation of gender difference could there be than the affirmation that "the male is not like the female" (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:36)? This declaration appears in the context of reproduction, indeed, at the end of the sacred pregnancy in which Mary emerges from her mother's womb.

Sūrat Āl ʿImrān recounts that a pregnant "woman/wife of Amram" dedicated "what was in [her] belly" to God (v. 35). "She delivered a female child" and seemed to think this was a problem, but "God knew best what she delivered, and the male is not like the female" (v. 36). This assertion flips the usual script. It does not treat male as the unmarked category. Nor

37. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (4th rev. ed.; Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

38. Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition," *MW* 79 (1989): 161–187, 163. Smith and Haddad note that although some exceptional mystics might find her appropriate as a role model, for ordinary believers "Mary is not and by definition cannot be a model for human aspiration in Islam because she is clearly recognized and treated as unlike anyone else." Quoted in Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 160.

does it simply state that males and females differ. Instead, the female sets the standard against which the male is compared.[39] Presumably, this is because of the role Mary—singled out from a group of women—will play by bearing the prophet Jesus and continuing the divine narrative of prophets in history.

Sūrat Maryam's account of Mary's travails epitomizes qur'ānic attention to, and valorization of, women's embodiment. No experience is so quintessentially associated with women as childbirth. In mapping Mary's experience of labor—pain, despair, eventual acceptance—the Qur'ān presents a compelling account of a strongly female and irreducibly embodied experience.[40] Mary functions "as a semi-mythical sacred female figure"[41] and a "paradigmatic mother."[42] The Qur'ān presents a positive notion of motherhood and also uses "the term 'mother' to describe a purified, perfected receptacle through which God reveals a multiplicity of signs."[43] Mary's sexual purity receives prominence in her claim that she is "not a whore (*baghī*)" (v. 20). Though less focused on the experience of labor and delivery than Sūrat Maryam, Sūrat Āl 'Imrān is, as Neuwirth points out, frank in its use of terms referring to female reproductive anatomy.[44]

For amina wadud, the qur'ānic attention to Mary's experience of childbirth surpasses anything found in Christian scripture or theology. The "special function" of childbirth merits "detailed mention to attest to its significance

39. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 101–102, offers a somewhat different reading of this line.

40. Geissinger writes that Mary's "lonely labour and delivery are movingly, even hauntingly depicted" ("Mary in the Qur'an," 385). There remains more to be written about the qur'ānic treatment of embodiment as it relates to questions of breast-feeding, menstruation, sex, and ablution. Of course not all women are biologically capable, or desirous, of bearing biological children or mothering offspring of any sort. For cis women (those whose gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth), a variety of factors may intervene. For trans, non-binary, and gender-fluid individuals, pregnancy is a more complicated subject. Although there has been some limited scholarship on gender identity and Islamic law (see brief discussion and citations in Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* [2nd ed.; London: Oneworld, 2016], Chapter 5), there has to date been relatively little on gender and the Qur'ān.

41. Neuwirth, "House of Abraham," 504.

42. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, 41.

43. Ibid., 40–41. The parallel between Muḥammad—the *ummī* prophet—and the virginal Mary has been frequently asserted and occasionally productively explored, including briefly in Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 145–146. Jerusha Tanner Lamptey takes up the comparison at length in Chapter 5 of *Divine Words, Female Voices: Muslima Explorations in Comparative Feminist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2018), "Bearers of the Words: Muhammad and Mary as Feminist Exemplars" (121–155).

44. Neuwirth, "House of Abraham," 512.

in the Qur'anic worldview."[45] In her essay "The Birth of Aliya Maryam," Seemi Ghazi connects Mary's spiritual opening to the act of childbirth—and notes the ritual function of recitation of Sūrat Maryam for laboring women.[46] Neuwirth perceives in both *sūrah*s focused on Mary "the particular sensitivity and concern that the Qurʾān harbors for the female condition."[47] In her article exploring Mary's potential prophethood, Kakar insists that part of what makes her example so powerful is precisely that unlike certain female ascetics, Mary is undeniably female, and need not sacrifice her experience of embodied womanhood to live prophetically.[48]

Mona Siddiqui's account of Sūrat Maryam differs considerably. When she was pregnant with her first child, Siddiqui recounts, her "mother encouraged [her] to read sūra Maryam at least once a day throughout [her] whole pregnancy." Siddiqui read it but does not believe it "'spoke' to her "as a woman, 'chosen by God' above so many other women… in a way which was unique, which [she] could hold on to as special or symbolic."[49] Rather, it seemed to her to be another presentation of the "bigger, eternal message of the ultimate story—God's infinite presence and mercy."[50] Even the embodied experience of pregnancy becomes a vehicle for the insistently monotheistic message of the Qurʾān.[51] As Abboud points out, Mary thus serves "as a model to the Prophet Muhammad." Her "journey celebrates the powerful role of the feminine in the fertile land of the maternal and renders Maryam, from this essentialist perspective, on an equal level with other male prophets and apostles."[52] Here, Abboud connects the two lines of argument: Mary is, like Muḥammad and certain other men, a prophet; she carries out her prophetic duties, however, by fulfilling the exclusively female destiny of bearing a child. Unusually, a woman's (ordinary if not universal) experience becomes a model for a man's (very unusual) experience; its moral resonance stands independent of its particular gendered form.

45. Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 40.

46. Seemi Bushra Ghazi, "The Birth of Aliya Maryam," in Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore (ed.), *Voices of Life: Family, Home, and Society* (Voices of Islam 3; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 113–122.

47. Neuwirth, "Foreword," xvii.

48. Kakar, "Is She a Prophet?," 14.

49. Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 149.

50. Ibid., 150.

51. Or, as I once put it, "human events are merely in service to the sacred history that the text recounts." Kecia Ali, Elyse Goldstein, and Elaine Guillemin, "Sacred Stories: Mothers and Daughters?," *Vox Feminarum: The Canadian Journal of Feminist Spirituality* (Spring 2003): 7–13.

52. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 151.

Yet even as Mary's story shares its main arc with stories of (other) prophets—those chosen by God seldom find their tasks easy, and Mary is no exception—elements of her story reflect specifically gendered forms of injustice. As Geissinger shows, her story posits experiences of isolation and condemnation that arise from perceived feminine transgressions of social-sexual norms. Mary's gestation leads to a "subversive birth." Isolated, abandoned, chastity impugned, Mary withdraws socially.[53] Although in some respects her exile is like that of Abraham, Moses, and Muḥammad, the Qur'ān depicts "her gendered vulnerability, as a woman alone with no family to protect her."[54] Mary's "outcast" status is the more poignant given that she had not sought the situation into which she is thrust.[55] Unlike her counterpart Zachariah, who, impressed by Mary, entreats God for "good progeny" (*dhurriyyah ṭayyibah*, Q Āl ʿImrān 3:38), "Mary's annunciation," Geissinger observes, "does not bring her welcome news. Nowhere is it suggested that she expects to become a mother in the near future, much less that she has been prayerfully longing for a child."[56]

Mary expresses incredulity at the notion that she will "have a son when no man has touched me" (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:47), but she neither refuses outright nor consents enthusiastically. Kueny, exploring Mary's "unique procreative partnership with God,"[57] has argued that

> God's choosing of Mary to bear his 'signs' in many ways mirrors his partnering with the earth to create life… In theory, Mary, like the earth in the eyes of exegetes, could have rejected God's breath that imparted his spirit into her body… While God could have created Jesus in Mary's womb regardless of her own desires, her consent and receptive nature are vital to the Qur'an's theological message.[58]

53. Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 380.

54. Ibid., 385. For a parallel discussion with regard to the biblical text, see Betsy J. Bauman-Martin, "Mary and the Marquise: Reading the Annunciation in the Romantic Rape Tradition," in Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes*, 217–231; for brief discussion of a Christian interpretation that insists on the necessity of Mary's consent, see Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 157.

55. Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 385.

56. Ibid., 384; see also Bauman-Martin, "Mary and the Marquise," 228: "the male voice has women submit to coerced sex or rape and then claim to have been loved, singled out, or honored." Here, of course, the issue is undesired childbearing rather than unwanted sex, though in many lives the two coincide.

57. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, 43.

58. Kueny, "Reproducing Power," 254.

One reading of this story suggests a crucial parallel with the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son (Q Ṣaffāt 37:102–103), which attends to the son's consent. The son agrees but does not suffer actual death at his father's hand; Mary "acquiesces to God's request and bears and delivers Jesus successfully, but in great hardship and pain."[59] She suffers a sort of social death, as her reputation is disparaged. Only her son's miraculous ability to defend her (Q Maryam 19:29–33) exonerates her and saves her from ostracism.

Even as the Qur'ān emphasizes Mary's gendered vulnerability, it attends to her feelings, particularly of loss. In this respect, it strongly parallels the story of Moses's birth (Q Ṭā-hā 20:37–40, Q Qaṣaṣ 28:7–13). (In turn, this sense of loss on Moses's mother's part echoes the loss felt by Jacob during Joseph's absence, creating a parallel between the prophet-sons drawn into Pharaoh's orbit and between their parents, father on the one hand and mother on the other, who receive *waḥy*.[60]) Both birth stories subvert dominant patriarchal norms. Geissinger notes the parallels between the "subversive births" of Jesus and Moses, "births which are seemingly—but clearly not actually—'illegitimate.'"[61] Discussing the emotional impact of childbearing and (temporary) loss on Moses's mother,[62] Geissinger notes the "noticeable focus on the mother's emotions," also "a noteworthy feature of the story of Mary in Q 19."[63] These stories' "subversion of patriarchal notions of 'legitimacy'" connects to and "provides a mordant comment on" the rejection of Muḥammad's prophethood, given that he too is rejected for seeming nonconformity with dominant expectations.[64]

Thus, both the story of Mary's birth and childhood and the story of her labor and delivery can be read in ways that undercut larger patriarchal narratives. Like interpretations based on egalitarian or gender-neutral sameness, interpretations premised on gender-based difference situate Mary comfortably in the larger moral and narrative world of the Qur'ān. Indeed, the fact that one can argue for either the sameness of Mary to male prophetic figures or for her difference from them is itself noteworthy. The literary evidence supports seemingly dichotomous readings: Mary is like men *and*

59. Ibid., 254.

60. On Moses' mother as recipient of *waḥy*, consult the sources cited above on Mary as prophet as well as Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 39.

61. Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 391.

62. Q Mu'minūn 28:10, "Moses's mother felt a void in her heart"; cf. v. 13, "We restored him to his mother… so that she might be comforted, not grieve, and know that God's promise is true." Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 389 (the translation is the one Geissinger uses).

63. Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 389.

64. Ibid., 391. On Mary's story as a parallel to Muḥammad's story, consult also Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 144–146.

therefore there are no gender-based limits to what women can achieve; Mary excels in a way that is essentially different from how excellent men excel *and therefore* women's achievements are worthy even though they may differ from men's. Each of these readings has a defensible claim to coherence within a broader qur'ānic worldview. In the next section, I argue for a third approach that refuses these binaries and instead embraces an irresolvable tension between polarities.

Queerness

Mary unsettles binaries. Despite the qur'ānic declaration at her birth that "the male is not like the female," which neatly divides the sexes, other passages disturb the categorization. Verses oscillate between highlighting Mary's femaleness and likening her to prophetic and pious males. Throughout the Qur'ān, Mary shifts between being a peer to males and being singled out as female. Mary is both among and separate(d) from "the women of the worlds" (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:42). She parallels Zachariah and his son and joins with male worshippers in pious prostration (v. 43). Her story is queer in "the broad sense of challenging the stability of all sexual"—or, more particularly, sex/gender—"identities, and, beyond that, insisting on the fluidity of all seemingly fixed boundaries."[65] Mary's story reproduces maternity but destabilizes gender, especially in its account of her birth and childhood through the angelic annunciation (vv. 35–47).

Discussing fairy tales, Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill write, "A queer reader intuitively seeks a tale's structural distinctions—polarities, binaries, or relational chains—that fail to conform to heteronormative claims."[66] In Sūrat Āl ʿImrān's account of Mary, the "relational chains" that connect Jesus to Moses and Jesus to Zachariah are replete with generational and gendered slippages. In Sūrat Maryam, Mary's experiences of "subversive birth" and receipt of *waḥy* connect her most closely to another woman: Moses' mother. But Sūrat Āl ʿImrān's narrative of Mary's gestation and birth, childhood, and annunciation, instead links her most closely to two men: Zachariah and John.

Mary's gestation and birth prefigure the gestation and birth of Jesus. Both pregnancies are marked by maternal devotion and maternal power. Mary's mother dedicates the child growing in her womb to God's service (Q 3:35). Following this presumably atypical act, she names Mary and seeks God's

65. Judith Plaskow, "Foreword," in Drinkwater, Lesser, and Schneer (eds.), *Torah Queeries*, xi–xii, xii.

66. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill, "Introduction: Once Upon a Queer Time," in Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill (eds.), *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 1–26, 15.

protection for her and her offspring. Mary's mother's act of naming here foreshadows Jesus' matronymic, but it also places her among those (male) prophetic figures in the biblical/qur'ānic tradition who appeal to God for themselves and their descendants. Mary's mother acts in ways one might expect a father to act; this is the only commentary on his absence in this *sūrah*.[67] (Zachariah's wife, presumed barren [Q Āl ʿImrān 3:40, Q Maryam 19:8], never negotiates with God.) Eventually, Zachariah takes guardianship of the child and Mary is written into a story of service to God. Zachariah, impressed by Mary, prays: "God, grant me from your power good progeny. You are the one who listens to prayers" (Q 3:38).

Notably, each of these tales of pregnancy and childbirth is odd, problematic, or at least extraordinary. Few conform to what is purportedly the norm: a married couple conceiving a child, without divine intervention, whom the woman carries to term and that they then raise.[68] Even within marital contexts, generativity and reproduction are less than straightforward. Mary's mother's gestation of her daughter is marked by her vow and God's acceptance; Mary's father remains firmly off-page. Zachariah is married, but as he notes, "old age has come upon me and my wife is barren" (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:40; cf. Q Maryam 19:5). Mary's conception of Jesus bypasses entirely a key element of heteronormative patriarchal family structure, which is male control of female reproductive labor in a dyadic marital relationship.[69] Indeed, much of Sūrat Āl ʿImrān treats men as "superfluous, and patriarchal categories of male social dominance are emphatically bracketed."[70] Abboud argues that "If in *Sūrat Maryam*, the female was venerated for her power of fertility, here the female is venerated for her maternal power."[71]

Even as Mary's conception, gestation, and delivery of Jesus acknowledge maternal power, that power is not necessarily gendered female. Motherhood, here, involves privileges of naming and of independence traditionally associated with men and fatherhood. At the same time, ambivalence, fear, and pain—physical as well as psychological—enter into the equation. Prevailing ideas about female weakness, and its ties to female embodiment,

67. There is a good deal more to be said about absent fathers in qur'ānic passages. On the Qur'ān's refusal to sacralize fatherhood, consult Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Syracuse, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

68. I address the disjunction between modern Muslim appeals to normative nuclear families and the presence of disparate models in sacred sources, including prophetic biography, in "Muhammad and Khadija," *Critical Muslim* 14 (2015): 53–63.

69. Kueny discusses qur'ānic accounts of Mary's conception of Jesus, as well as later interpretations of them, in "Reproducing Power," 251–254.

70. Neuwirth, "The House of Abraham," 513.

71. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 128.

reveal even the biological aspects of motherhood to be social. As Muslims increasingly address varied approaches to gender binaries, trans womanhood (and manhood), and gendered norms, questions about gendered parenthood arise. The intertwined stories in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān prompt a closer look at other accounts of reproduction and childrearing in the qurʾānic text. Few if any conform to what is typically understood as the norm. Although Q Nisāʾ 4:1 describes progeny—indeed, humanity—emerging from the coupling of mates, other accounts signal the fragility of the marital bond and the need to ensure that children receive their proper nourishment by nursing even if the marital bond is broken (Q Baqarah 2:233; Q Ṭalāq 65:6) or, as in the case of Moses, the child was exiled for his own safety and adopted by outsiders (Q Qaṣaṣ 28:7). The mother/nursling bond is powerful. It is an indication of how serious the matter is that when the apocalypse comes, mothers will forget their nurslings; only the most extraordinary calamity could cause this abandonment (Q Ḥajj 22:2). Mother-child bonds are presumed to be strong; father-child bonds are sometimes strong, sometimes seemingly absent.

In addition to its failure to conform to now-conventional expectations about reproduction, Āl ʿImrān's narrative presents numerous disrupted "relational chains." Zachariah, a kind of substitute for Mary's father, also parallels Mary's mother: like her, he desires pious offspring. John, the son born to Zachariah and his wife, prepares the ground for a new parallelism between Mary and Zachariah: Zachariah's notification about John finds an echo in Mary's being told about Jesus. Mary and Zachariah are both informed about the children they are going to have; John and Jesus come to share some characteristics, including purity.

These relationships and connections are imbricated in other scriptural themes and patterns. The reference to Mary as chosen from or among "the women of the worlds" (*ʿālamīn*, Q Āl ʿImrān 3:42) evokes Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, where God is spoken of as "sovereign of the worlds" (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*, Q Fātiḥah 1:2). When the text immediately commands, "Mary, be devoutly obedient (*iqnutī*, i.e., have *qunūt*) to your Lord and prostrate yourself and bow down with those who bow down" (v. 43), it moves from situating Mary among (while simultaneously distinguishing her from) an all-female collective ("the women of the worlds") to situating her in a male or mixed-gender group ("those who bow down" is a masculine plural noun, *rākiʿīn*). As soon as she is "chosen from," or "chosen among," or even "chosen over"—the preposition *ʿalā* is ambiguous—her connection with the women is immediately undone. She is extracted from a female environment and placed in a mixed or (otherwise) exclusively male group of worshippers. The purification that she undergoes precedes her removal from the group of women to the male/mixed group. More saliently, it connects her closely to Zachariah. As Toorawa has noted, purity is a central concept in Sūrat Maryam; the purification of Mary and the

purity of Zachariah, whose name draws from the same root, links the two.[72] In these accounts, "the lens shifts focus from normative sexual dynamics… or patriarchal moral lessons… to the tales' internal struggles, suggestive of multiple and more complex desires and their perversely performative nature."[73] Mary's struggles are sometimes over matters of "normative sexual dynamics," as when she is accused of inchastity, but at other times, they focus on "internal struggles," as when she confronts God's angel.

A queer reading does not reject approaches that emphasize sameness (Men can be prophets? Women too!) or celebrate difference (Look at how the Qur'ān recognizes motherhood and women's experience!) so much as indicate their limitations. The first sets up the equivalence of male and female; the second their radical dissimilarity. Each is plausible; each is inadequate. It may be that "the male is not like the female" but this declaration tells only part of the story. It assumes that male and female are clear and utterly separate categories, and moreover, that they are unified within themselves. Yet the female isn't even always like the female: Mary, purified and chosen, is *unlike* the other "women of the worlds," just as Muḥammad's wives "are not like other women" (Q Aḥzāb 33:31). Both difference and sameness, then, are situational and never absolute—much like queer readings.[74]

Comparison

As with the part, so with the whole: the Qur'ān's treatment of Mary illustrates dynamics operative in the entire text. Sūrat Āl ʿImrān and Sūrat Maryam contain multiple, contentious meanings which resist simplification and fixity. If the Mary of Sūrat Āl ʿImrān moves restlessly between male contexts and pointed femaleness, her counterpart in Sūrat Maryam engages in embodied labor, seemingly categorically female. These distinctions suggest not only fluid visions of gender and generativity within Sūrat Āl ʿImrān but varied characterizations across the qur'ānic text as a whole. It is in this sense that what Judith Plaskow has written about the Torah applies to the Qur'ān: it "emerges as a queer text, filled with fertile contradictions. It is replete with shifty and shifting characters who challenge norms that the text elsewhere seems to proclaim as absolute, sometimes policing boundaries that at other moments dissolve."[75] One way to consider the relative insignificance of

72. Toorawa, "Sūrat Maryam," 32 and throughout.

73. Turner and Greenhill, "Introduction," 3.

74. On this point as applied to religious difference, consult Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other: A* Muslima *Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

75. Plaskow, "Foreword," xii. It is debatable whether the Qur'ān has "shifty"

boundaries (or the importance of transgression of boundaries) in Mary's story is to focus on the *story* aspect.

The nature of qur'ānic narrative is the subject of some scholarly attention, although to date, feminist and gender-minded interpreters have tended to focus on halakhic rather than haggadic material and concerns.[76] Neuwirth has suggested that the Qur'ān may be best understood as doing something *other* than narrative, even in those moments when it is concerned with character and events.[77] But less important than whether any story constitutes a proper narrative is that stories cannot be reduced, as so-called legal verses typically are, to directly prescriptive content. Stories, and their interpretation, may convey norms or rules indirectly, but they differ from verses that prescribe portions for inheritance, postures for prayer, requirements for dress, or regulations for marital conduct. Gender-minded interpreters—among whom I count myself—have tended to emphasize norm-delivering statements, particularly those that differentiate between men and women in marital matters, especially to contest extant patriarchal interpretations of such passages.[78] Yet by shifting to story rather than rules, one avoids the patriarchal norms and boundaries that the Qur'ān "elsewhere" affirms.[79]

Mary's story, which centrally addresses maleness, femaleness, and reproduction, bypasses marital hierarchy. The absence of a husband for Mary in the text is opportune for feminist and gender-conscious exegetes: male marital authority cannot take root.[80] Neither a husband's control nor his responsibility to provide or support figures in Mary's storyline. Instead, qur'ānic presentations of moments from her life show her confronting challenges, relying sometimes on support from kin or quasi-kin such as the infant Jesus or Zachariah, but mostly on God. Verses highlight Mary's

characters; there seems to be general agreement that they are flatter than biblical characters and do fewer morally ambiguous or wrong things.

76. YaSiin Rahmaan's contribution to the *JFSR* roundtable "Feminism and Islam" ("Feminist Edges of Muslim Feminist Readings of Qur'anic Verses," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 [2016]: 142–148) offers a thoughtful reflection on the importance of deep experience with the Qur'ān as well as "rigorous feminist literary critique" of individual *sūrah*s and *sūrah* clusters. Alongside a broader evaluation of gendered language in key scriptural passages, Rahmaan discusses Mary, and considers the possibility that she is a "mother prophet" (145).

77. Neuwirth, "Foreword," xiv–xv.

78. Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, esp. Chapter 7.

79. Scholars of rabbinics recognize the ways in which haggadic narratives may contradict or undermine halakhic prescriptions. One study which treats this dynamic and considers its relevance for Jewish feminist interpretation is Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1998).

80. Bauman-Martin, "Reading the Annunciation," 230.

ungendered virtues of spiritual tenacity and devout obedience to God. Still, gender remains central, even if only insofar as the challenges she confronts—childbirth, accusations of sexual impropriety—are gendered—that is, they are linked to social norms of biological womanhood. The question of how and to whom Mary serves as a model requires attention: Geissinger and Abboud show that the Qur'ān presents her as an analogue or exemplar for Muḥammad. Contemporary interpreters could consider how her story might inform qur'ānic accounts of women's lives as well as how they relate, if indeed they do relate, to questions about normative family structures and women's place within them.

Asma Barlas has called the Qur'ān "radically egalitarian and even anti-patriarchal."[81] Her most convincing arguments point to the text's refusal to sacralize fathers or enshrine father-privilege. What better place to note one of the Qur'ān's intermittently anti-patriarchal moments than a story where there is no husband-father to serve as patriarch? Likewise, the absence of husband-fathers in crucial qur'ānic prophet-stories complicates the resolutely dyadic vision of human reproduction articulated in Q Nisā' 4:1: "Revere your Lord who created you from a single soul-self and from it created its mate and dispersed, from the two of them, many men and women."[82]

Both tellings of Mary's story resist simplification and fixity. So too, the heterogeneity of the qur'ānic corpus as a whole suggests an irreducible tension. Sūrat Āl 'Imrān largely concerns itself with the transmission of prophetic lineages and the continuity of prophetic lines, with community and the power and necessity thereof; Sūrat Maryam, in contrast, focuses on individual spiritual struggle. In Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, Mary has family and community ties. In Sūrat Maryam, she faces her travails alone—except for God, who does not forsake her.[83]

This plurality of approaches attests to the incompleteness and insufficiency of any one account. There are obvious limitations to what a queer reading can accomplish. Yet a queer reading of Mary does not foreclose other readings. Indeed, it recognizes the important work that various readings can do in particular contexts and for specific readers—and indeed, that what is normative or transgressive itself depends on context and audience. But such

81. Barlas, *Believing Women*, 5.

82. My translation. See Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, on the multifaceted nature of qur'ānic discourse on reproduction.

83. The thematic unity within each *sūrah* suggests the need for careful contextual readings of the material contained therein. This is the case throughout the qur'ānic text. For instance, both Sūrat al-Nūr (Q 24) and Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (Q 33) discuss female clothing and sexual boundaries. But whereas Nūr is primarily concerned with individual righteous conduct, Aḥzāb's larger preoccupation is communal harmony and the threats thereto.

readings are always contingent and always on the verge of being undone. Queer reading, Greenhill and Turner tell us, "privileges the ephemeral, momentary sites and phenomena that appear and quickly disappear."[84] Chinks in the armor of patriarchy do not make the Qur'ān an anti-patriarchal text. Several important passages assume or affirm male control over women.[85] Yet the fabric of male domination is not seamlessly woven: it has gaps where a stitch was dropped, where it threatens to unravel. A queer reading need not reject approaches focused on sameness or difference; it need only indicate their limitations. I would suggest valid theological reasons to appreciate qur'ānic messiness. Human community is never as simple as some would have it. "Whoever you are," American Sufi teacher Rabia Terri Harris has said about the Qur'ān, "if you take this thing seriously, it is going to mess with your story."[86]

Queer readings of the Qur'ān cannot, and need not, tell the whole story. They need only make people a little less smugly certain about the meanings they derive from the text. Qur'ānic verses warn repeatedly against human arrogance, against human certainty about social status as ascribed through women and sons and heaps of precious metal (e.g., Q Āl ʿImrān 3:14). Human values are often misguided; as a result, so are human interpretations. The Qur'ān is complicated. It both asserts and subverts patriarchal values. The joke, ultimately, is on those who cling too tightly to this world's comforts and dominant, established value schemas. Mary, unsettled and unsettling, allows readers to perceive the Qur'ān itself as a queer text, contesting its own narratives and refusing fixity—and in this way, Mary is perhaps exemplary, but not unique.

84. Greenhill and Turner, "Introduction," 14.

85. For a recent exploration of these issues and the ways in which interpreters committed to women's equality and gender justice debate them, consult the aforementioned roundtable in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

86. Rabia Terri Harris, personal communication, 2013.

JIQSA 2 (2017): 111–148

LAW, STRUCTURE, AND MEANING IN SŪRAT AL-BAQARAH

JOSEPH E. LOWRY

Abstract

This article uses the legal passages in Sūrat al-Baqarah to index the *sūrah*'s themes and structure. A consideration of all the *sūrah*'s legal passages shows that they contribute to a narrative of covenantal succession that structures Sūrat al-Baqarah as a whole. The main legal passages in the *sūrah* (vv. 178-203, 215-242) form a "Neo-Covenantal Code" to govern the civil and ritual life of the qur'ānic community. Other legal passages invoke biblical law (vv. 83–84), distinguish the qur'ānic community's ritual practices from those of pagan and earlier biblical communities (vv. 142–177), and provide specific guidance on matters of charity, finance, and commerce (vv. 261–283). Although Sūrat al-Baqarah's narrative arc culminates in readying the qur'anic community, as successors to the Covenant, for military conflict, the placement of passages relating to certain matters of commercial law near the *sūrah*'s end may indicate a secondary process of composition.

Keywords

Law, covenant, narrative, *sūrah* form, *sūrah* composition

Introduction

In this article I use the legal passages in Sūrat al-Baqarah as a key for indexing the *sūrah*'s themes and structure.[1] The goal of such an embedded reading

1. Thanks are due to Devin Stewart and Shawkat Toorawa for providing helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article. I am especially grateful to Marianna Klar for extensive comments on a later draft. I benefitted from her constructive criticisms and suggestions in too many places in what follows to acknowledge individually, so I am acknowledging them all here. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the conference of the International Qur'anic Studies Association in Atlanta in November 2015 and in the Arab Crossroads lecture series at New York University in Abu Dhabi in April 2017. I am grateful for all the comments received on those occasions. Any and all shortcomings are my responsibility alone.

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441/jiqsa.2.2017.a006

of qur'ānic legal materials, in addition to providing a provisional survey of varieties of qur'ānic legal discourses, is to give a detailed account of the contributions of qur'ānic legal materials to the thematic structuring of this and other *sūrah*s. In order to do this, I focus less on background and legal doctrine—though these are important details that could play a larger role in a different kind of study—and more on understanding the content and placement of the *sūrah*'s legal materials within the *sūrah*'s narrative arc. The legal materials in a given *sūrah* are not in every case the *sūrah*'s most important element(s), but they cannot be understood properly without reference to the *sūrah* as a whole, and the *sūrah* itself—or at least one with significant legal content—cannot be understood as a whole without a careful assessment of its legal components. The focus in this study on Sūrat al-Baqarah's legal passages is intended to complement other approaches to the study of Sūrat al-Baqarah and of *sūrah* form more generally.[2]

There is a wealth of traditional literature on law in the Qur'ān, ranging from contextualizing narratives (*ḥadīth*, *sīrah*, *maghāzī*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*), to formal exegesis (*tafsīr*), to Islamic law and legal theory (*fiqh*, *aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*). This literature is never irrelevant to a study such as the present one, even though the questions posed about the Qur'ān in such works reflect the distinctive interests of the Islamic pietistic, exegetical, and legal traditions. Thus, the questions posed and insights offered by the tradition about the Qur'ān do not always exhaust the questions of interest to modern scholarship. One important reason for that is the fact that the tradition received the qur'ānic text at a temporal remove from the original qur'ānic audience. Thus, issues of *sūrah* form and performativity are frequently subordinated to other concerns, such as context reconstruction or lexicography.

Moreover, after a certain point Muslim exegetes and jurists generally study the Qur'ān and para-qur'ānic texts as written texts (the importance of oral transmission notwithstanding) in the context of a wider scholastic enterprise that is broadly logocentric.[3] In general, the tradition views the Qur'ān not as

2. In two recent articles, Marianna Klar has made a powerful case for eclecticism in the study of whole *sūrah*s. Marianna Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure: Combining Synchronicity with Diachronicity in *Sūrat al-Baqara*. Part One," *JQS* 19 (2017): 1–38, 1, and "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure: Combining Synchronicity with Diachronicity in *Sūrat al-Baqara*. Part Two," *JQS* 19 (2017): 64–105, 80–88. Dr. Klar very kindly shared the proofs of "Part Two" with me prior to its publication.

3. The complexity of the Qur'ān's language led on the one hand to the general conclusion that God's speech would usually elude certainty in interpretation but on the other hand to the production of a highly sophisticated body of theoretical writing on language and interpretation. Three accounts that show the range of issues posed by the Qur'ān to Islamic legal theory and interpretation are Bernard Weiss, *The Search*

one among many examples of late antique biblical literature but instead as the fulfillment of the biblical tradition—a perspective that launched a literary and intellectual tradition of enormous breadth and sophistication and that has a creative relationship to the early history of the text. This article does not ignore the tradition, but does consider that it belongs to the reception history of the text.

Literature on Qur'ānic Law

The modern Western study of law in the Qur'ān began in the nineteenth century with philologically driven searches for origins, influence, borrowing, and the like, and focused mostly on connections with the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature.[4] Early and mid-twentieth century studies of the Qur'ān such as the works of Nöldeke and, later, of Watt were not much interested in legal topics.[5] The late twentieth century brought a couple of studies that

for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (2nd rev. ed.; Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2010), 150–159 (on the status of the Qur'ān); Aron Zysow, *The Economy of Certainty: An Introduction to the Typology of Islamic Legal Theory* (RAIS 2; Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, 2013), 49–111 (on major issues in the interpretation of revealed language); and Rumee Ahmed, *Narratives of Islamic Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17–71 (on specific interpretive problems raised by the form and content of the Qur'ān in Hanafi jurisprudence).

4. The two most important older works on qur'ānic law are Robert Roberts, *Das Familien-, Sklaven- und Erbrecht im Qorân* (Leipziger Semistiche Studien 2; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1908) and Josef R. Rivlin, *Gesetz im Koran: Kultus und Ritus* (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1934). These form part of a longer-term trend in scholarship that investigates the biblical and rabbinic background of qur'ānic materials: Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Leipzig: M. W. Kaufmann, 1902; revised ed. of Bonn, 1833); Hartwig Hirschfeld, *Beiträge zur Erklärung des Ḳorân* (Leipzig: Otto Schulze, 1886); Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1926); Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainchen: Schulze, 1931); Abraham Katsh, *Judaism in Islām: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its Commentaries, Suras II and III* (New York: New York University Press, 1954). A more recent trend in Qur'ān scholarship explores the text's Christian background. See, e.g., Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010).

5. Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, and Otto Pretzl, *Geschichte des Qorans* (3 vols.; Leipzig: Dietrich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909–1938). Watt provides a useful (if very general) summary of legal rules but is uninterested in their literary settings; W. M. Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 162–166. Paret's *Kommentar* to his German translation of the Qur'ān does offer useful insights into the Qur'ān's recurring legal turns of phrase. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1981). Two notable exceptions to the general disinterest in the topic are Erwin Gräf, *Jagdbeute und*

focused on textual problems in specific legal passages that were thought to shed some light on the composition and the early history of the Qurʾān.[6] More recent attempts to study qurʾānic law have often simplified the Qurʾān's legal content and have not considered the potential literary significance, whether formal or thematic, of the Qurʾān's legal passages.[7]

Schlachttier im islamischen Recht: Eine Untersuchung zur Entwicklung der islamischen Jurisprudenz (Bonner Orientalische Studien, Neue Serie 7; Bonn: Orientalisches Seminar, 1959) and Kees Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran* (Leiden: Brill, 1968). S. D. Goitein's article "The Birth-Hour of Muslim Law?," *MW* 50 (1960): 23–29, should also be mentioned. He argues that verses 42–51 of Sūrat al-Nisāʾ preserve Muḥammad's realization that adjudication lay within the scope of his religious authority. I am not convinced that the verses in question were generated by the circumstances imagined by Goitein; they could just as easily be part of a general religious polemic.

6. See especially David Powers, *Studies in Qur'an and* Ḥadīth*: The Formation of the Islamic Law of Inheritance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986) and the important survey by Patricia Crone, "Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qurʾān," *JSAI* 18 (1994): 1–37.

7. Holger Zellentin's recent study certainly recognizes the theological and doctrinal complexity of some qurʾānic legislation, but his interests lie more in the connections between qurʾānic law and late antique debates over the applicability of biblical law to gentile monotheists than in the internal structures of the Qurʾān itself. Holger Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's Legal Culture: The* Didascalia Apostolorum *as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). Neal Robinson provides one of the best analyses of Sūrat al-Baqarah, but he is mostly interested in demonstrating narrative coherence and the importance of biblical parallels. Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (2nd rev. ed.; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 201–223. Fred Donner refers frequently to "Qur'anic law," but it is unclear what specifically is meant by that term. See Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010), 73, 87, 101, 203–204. In her important study of Meccan *sūrah* composition, Neuwirth displays little interest in legal matters. There is also the recent study of the legal content of verse 282 in light of rabbinic literature by Reimund Leicht, but there seems not to be much of a connection with rabbinic law, and literary structures are not the primary interest of the author; see "The Commandment of Writing Down Loan Agreements," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations in the Qurʾānic Milieu*, (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 593–614. In general, the various studies cited in connection with Table 3 (at n. 55 below) that are devoted to analyses of Sūrat al-Baqarah pay only cursory attention to its legal passages and have difficulty integrating them into their thematic analyses. The Pakistani Qurʾān scholar Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī does propose a holistic reading of individual *sūrah*s and groups of *sūrah*s that takes account of legal passages (see nn. 12, 35, and 54 below). Wael Hallaq's recent work on the Qurʾān is concerned to demonstrate the continuity of a qurʾānic morality with that of Islamic law. See Wael Hallaq, "Groundwork of the Moral Law: A New Look at the Qurʾān and the Genesis of Sharīʿa," *ILS* 16 (2009): 239–279; and "Qurʾānic Constitutionalism and Moral Governmentality: Further Notes on the Founding Principles of Islamic Society and Polity," *CIS* 8 (2012): 1–51.

Sūrat al-Baqarah offers a good test for how one might assess the contribution of qurʾānic legal passages to an analysis of *sūrah* form and content. As the longest *sūrah* in the Qurʾān, it has had a hypnotizing effect on those who interest themselves in the Qurʾān's literary dimensions. The search for design and coherence proceeds according to structural, historicist, biblical, and other models, yet the *sūrah*'s coherence has proved difficult to discern. Plausible principles of qurʾānic composition emerge and recede even as a convincing picture of the whole remains tantalizing but elusive. In an entertaining but not completely surprising dialectic, the most totalizing strategies for reading the text—those based on what is called by some "Semitic rhetoric"—have contributed the least to the elucidation of its meaning.[8] The somewhat experimental approach adopted here abandons the quest for the laws of qurʾānic form and instead takes a more oblique route to the study of the form and content of Sūrat al-Baqarah by scrutinizing qurʾānic laws. Paradoxically, perhaps, a careful differentiation of the *sūrah*'s various legal passages provides one possible strategy for reading it as a text that exhibits a coherent thematic, structure, and trajectory.

Al-Baqarah is not the only long Medinan *sūrah* with a complex form and a subtly shifting series of themes in which law, legal ideas, and longer legislatively-oriented passages are complexly interwoven with homiletical, biblical, militant, and eschatological material.[9] It belongs to a group that includes at least Sūrat al-Nisāʾ and Sūrat al-Māʾidah, which also display their legislative content prominently, though in all three of these *sūrah*s the

8. Although proponents of this approach often furnish insights about the contributions of lexical interconnections within *sūrah*s to *sūrah* form, they frequently do so at the expense of thematic specificities. See the critical evaluation by Klar in "Text-Critical Approaches. Part One," 4–16, and "Text-Critical Approaches. Part Two," 83–84. A recent study that utilizes so-called Semitic rhetoric as a key to *sūrah* structure claims that we must not expect "a linear, logical order" in the Qurʾān because the Qurʾān belongs to "Semitic culture," and the "basic principle… is not progress in a straight line." Instead the text is said to exhibit various kinds of symmetries. Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), vii–viii. Without discounting the importance of chiasmus and ring structure for understanding *sūrah* form in some instances, generalizations about the non-linearity of Semitic culture should give us all pause.

9. Note the analogy to the field's difficulty in studying the polythematic *qaṣīdah*. For a survey of approaches, see Suzanne Stetkevych, "Structuralist Interpretations of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Critique and New Directions," *JNES* 42 (1983): 85–107 and Montgomery, *Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah: The Tradition and Practice of Early Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1997). Nicolai Sinai also recognizes the parallel with the study of the *qaṣīdah*, specifically in regard to transitions between thematic sections: "The Qurʾan as Process," in Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context*, 407–439, 413, n. 16.

presentation of the legal passages has their own distinctive patternings and significance.

Interpretive Principles and Approach

Studying the function and significance of legal passages in the Qur'ān requires that one have some working hypotheses about qur'ānic composition, content, reception, and also law. The most critical working hypothesis in any study of qur'ānic laws or structures, which is almost never articulated in such studies, concerns function: what was the Qur'ān for, how did it work in context, and how might we know such things? These questions are important because the Qur'ān seems to have been a wildly successful text—what made it so popular? I begin by listing my own set of working hypotheses, which are meant to be flexible, provisional, and pragmatic:

1. It is useful to accept Angelika Neuwirth's characterization of the Meccan *sūrah*s as organic literary unities that evolved in some kind of liturgical performance context.[10] For the Meccan *sūrah*s, this solves the initial coherence problem from the perspective of practical criticism. It does not, however, preclude the search for meaning and structure but instead shifts that enterprise to a search for the 'wheres and hows' of coherence rather than to one about whether there is any coherence at all. Neuwirth's positing of a liturgical context for the performance of entire *sūrah*s also suggests a plausible social function for the text.

2. I assume that the lengthier Medinan *sūrah*s were modeled in some way on the Meccan *sūrah*s, but do not exclude the possibility that they represent performed texts in whole or in part or that they are purely 'literary' constructions that somehow reflect a redactional re-imagining of Meccan *sūrah*s. This leaves a number of compositional models available for consideration in light of the particular qur'ānic materials that one is investigating.[11]

10. Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (2nd ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007). Note, however, that she continues to view the long Medinan *sūrah*s in general as formally much less well-structured than the Meccan *sūrah*s. Angelika Neuwirth, "From Recitation through Liturgy to Canon: Sura Composition and Dissolution during the Development of Islamic Ritual," in *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 141–163, 154–155.

11. Nicolai Sinai, "The Unknown Known: Some Groundwork for Interpreting the Medinan Qur'an," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–2016), 47–96, esp.

3. I assume that *sūrah*s always exhibit both formal and semantic/thematic coherence of some kind, whether the *sūrah* is an organic literary unity or a deliberate construction that makes use of pre-existing materials. However individual *sūrah*s may have been constructed or received, I presume that they were constructed and/or received to some extent as meaningful wholes.[12]

4. In studying the Qur'ān, including qur'ānic ideas about law and qur'ānic legislation, one cannot ignore the *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and *tafsīr* traditions, but one must also recognize that that literature poses its own distinctive set of questions to the Qur'ān. Those questions aim to make theological sense of the Qur'ān and were often formulated at varying degrees of remove from the original qur'ānic audience. Like modern scholars, premodern Muslim jurists and exegetes are situated and interested readers with their own interpretive agendas. Put differently, in regard to ontological and epistemological terms, they are more like modern scholars than they are like the Qur'ān; to regard them as the exclusive textual supplement to the Qur'ān is, in effect, to sacralize them, and thereby to rob them of their intellectual and interpretive agency. My reluctance to sacralize the interpretive tradition does not in any way indicate that I do not hold it in high esteem.[13]

74, for an "evolutionary" model "according to which the Medinan texts are preceded by, and develop out of, the non-Medinan ones."

12. This assumption is now prevalent. See, e.g., the exemplary analysis in A. H. M. Zahniser, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisā'*," in Issa Boullata (ed.), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), 26–53, 29–30. For brief surveys of treatments of qur'ānic coherence in the Islamic exegetical tradition, see Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān: A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of* Naẓm *in* Tadabbur-i Qur'ān (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1986), 10–24, Nevin Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 158–186.

13. I am not claiming that it is possible to achieve a purely pre-*tafsīr* or pre-*fiqh* understanding of the Qur'ān. Indeed, our understanding of the Qur'ān usually begins, whether we acknowledge it or not, with the range of possible meanings identified by premodern Muslim scholars, though it might not, upon further inquiry, remain limited to that range. Our questions about the text naturally and necessarily differ, however, from those of premodern Muslim students of the Qur'ān. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, "Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way… The real meaning of a text… is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2nd rev. ed.; New York: Continuum, 2004), 296. Quite apart from any light they may shed on the early history of the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and *tafsīr* traditions deserve to be studied for their own sake for their

5. Although I struggle to define what counts as "law" in the Qur'ān, as a preliminary and pragmatic starting point, I distinguish between what I call the legal and the legislative. Legal passages invoke or refer to law or laws; legislative passages impose obligations on the qur'ānic audience to engage in specific, repeatable physical (i.e., not purely mental) conduct, using a number of rhetorical strategies, some of which are easily identifiable. Legislative passages can be viewed as a subset of the Qur'ān's legal passages.

6. The Qur'ān's legal passages might or might not be the most important part of a given *sūrah*. In either case, studying those legal passages in their *sūrah* context illuminates other aspects of that *sūrah*, and other passages in other *sūrah*s, whether from the point of view of theology, rhetoric, or *sūrah* form and content—or even qur'ānic law. Even when the legal passages prove to be worthwhile ends in themselves, they always bear on other questions about the Qur'ān.

7. We must keep in the back of our minds the question of how passages we identify as "legal" in the Qur'ān were originally received—that is, by what means were they received, in what form, in what context, and by whom. Legislative passages in particular presume a community of legal subjects capable of complying with that legislation. How qur'ānic legislation was initially consumed is difficult to know; we, like the exegetes or the *fuqahā'*, necessarily work with a written text. We must, nonetheless, remain aware of the Qur'ān's possible original orality, even in lengthy Medinan *sūrah*s, and of the complexities of its compositional processes, so that we do not over- or underestimate the qur'ānic text's systematicity or its communicative capacity in this and other subject matter areas.[14]

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considerable interpretive, scholarly, intellectual, and creative merit. But as Nicolai Sinai cautions, we cannot assume, just because the interpretive energy expended on the Qur'ān by Muslim tradition was particularly focused and sophisticated, that it uncovered or preserved reliable information about the Qur'ān's earliest history. Sinai, "The Unknown Known," 5, n. 48. To put my own approach in Sheldon Pollock's terms: In this article I am aiming for a historicist reading (his Plane 1); I do not assume that the tradition (Plane 2) is the *only* key to that reading; and I hope to remain aware of the inevitably presentist aspects of this undertaking (Plane 3). Sheldon Pollock, "Philology in Three Dimensions," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 5 (2014): 398–413.

14. I use the term "orality" here to refer to oral performativity, not to oral formulaic composition. Andrew Bannister has reached the perhaps surprising conclusion that Medinan *sūrah*s exhibited a greater formulaic density than Meccan ones, at least for the passages that he examined. Andrew Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014). For a folklorist's perspective on orality in the

8. In light of point 7, my starting point is always the text of the Qur'ān as we have it, and my entry point into that text is always its literary features, broadly construed. My analyses are therefore text-immanent and descriptive.

9. It is possible, and even desirable, to identify the many general and specific qur'ānic resonances with late antique and pre-Islamic Arabian literatures and practices, but doing so, even exhaustively, does not relieve us of the responsibility of trying to understand the Qur'ān on its own terms. Qur'ānic allusions to other materials, whether direct or oblique, function and signify within the Qur'ān for the qur'ānic audience.

10. Finally, the interdisciplinary study of legal passages in the Qur'ān (as in this article) is the necessary starting point for any responsible history of the beginnings of the post-qur'ānic phenomenon known as Islamic law.

The remarks above reflect my own skepticism about our ability to recover much information about the function of the Qur'ān in the original qur'ānic community except on the basis of inferences drawn from the Qur'ān itself. Even when we bring other texts to bear on the Qur'ān, our interpretations will have to be tested primarily on normal grounds of efficiency—how well and how extensively do they account for the Qur'ān's literary features and themes?

Interpreting Sūrat al-Baqarah

Guided but not constrained by these theses, I will survey in this article the form and content of the legal passages in Sūrat al-Baqarah against the background of, and as contributing to, the lexical, thematic, and structural features of the *sūrah*. Law is not necessarily the most important component in this *sūrah*, but a thorough examination of the *sūrah*'s legal content can shed important light on larger aspects of the *sūrah* as a whole. In the case of Sūrat al-Baqarah, this approach yields, or supports, a provisional (but hardly novel) interpretation of the *sūrah* as an Arabian re-imagining of a part of the biblical canon addressed to a new covenantal community. It also suggests, on literary grounds, some provisional conclusions about the construction and composition of this *sūrah*.

The legal passages in Sūrat al-Baqarah present the following specific issues that require analysis: (1) The *sūrah*'s two main legislative passages occur in its latter half in verses 178–203 and 215–242. A third legislative passage

Qur'ān, see Alan Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients? Folkore in the Qur'an* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

with its own distinct properties runs from verses 261 to 283. How are these passages related to each other, to the *sūrah*'s overall message or thematic trajectory, and to the *sūrah*'s structure? (2) The *sūrah* also contains other legal and legislative passages. The most important of these are the restatement of the Decalogue in verses 83–84 and the rules concerning the prayer direction, dietary restrictions, and the pilgrimage that appear within the section of the *sūrah* contained in verses 142–177. How, if at all, are they related to each other, to the three main legislative passages, to the *sūrah*'s overall message or thematic trajectory, and to the *sūrah*'s structure? The meanings of individual legal passages and the meaning of the whole text cannot, as I contend, easily be disentangled, but it will be clearest to discuss these two aspects of the *sūrah* separately. I will, accordingly, first treat the *sūrah*'s individual legal and legislative passages, move next to a general account of the form and content of the *sūrah*'s non-legal passages, and conclude by explaining how I understand the *sūrah*'s legal content in context and what that legal content, considered in context, might tell us about the *sūrah*'s form, meaning, and possibly composition.

Locating Law in Sūrat al-Baqarah

There are five sections of Sūrat al-Baqarah that contain legal materials of various kinds and densities. These comprise: (1) a reference to the biblical Covenant and to the Decalogue, (2) several rules relating to ritual practices of the qur'ānic audience, (3 and 4) two concentrated sets of legislation dealing with ritual and civil matters, and (5) rules on finance that culminate in a relatively technical passage on commercial law just before the *sūrah*'s conclusion.

The First Legal Passage: Covenant and Decalogue in Verses 83–84

The first passage I would identify as 'legal' in Sūrat al-Baqarah is an abbreviation and qur'ānic reformulation of the Decalogue, presented as connected with the Covenant:

> When God exacted the Covenant from the Jews (*mīthāq banī isrā'īl*)—"Serve only God; honor your parents, relatives, orphans, and the poor; speak nicely to others; hold prayers and give alms!"—they later turned away from it, except for a few.
>
> And When We exacted the Covenant with you (*mīthāqakum*)—"Do not shed blood; do not expel each other from your homes!"—you acknowledged it and gave witness. (vv. 83–84)

Verse 83 is a typical qur'ānic restatement of the Decalogue; the Qur'ān contains at least six such restatements of it.[15] Such passages are easily recognizable by the lists of obligations they contain, which always begin with the monotheism commandment followed, in most cases, by the injunction to honor parents.[16] Here, interestingly, it is suggested in both verse 83 and 84 that the Decalogue constitutes the content of the Covenant.[17] In verse 84, the decalogic material continues with the murder prohibition followed by one of several qur'ānic references to driving people from their homes. This last reference creatively conflates the Mosaic Exodus with the fact that Muḥammad and his followers were forced to leave their homes in Mecca, the point being to emphasize general biblical and specifically covenantal parallels between the histories and elections of the biblical and qur'ānic communities.[18]

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15. The Decalogue appears three times in in the Bible: in two versions very similar to each other at Exod 20:1–13 and Deut 5:6–16, and in a slightly different form at Exod 34:10–28 (in which the connection with the Covenant is made explicit). On the Decalogue in the Qur'ān, see, most recently, Angelika Neuwirth, "A Discovery of Evil in the Qur'ān?" in *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*, 253–276. After a survey of most previous scholarship, she identifies three versions of the Decalogue in the Qur'ān (in Sūrahs 2, 6, and 17) and interprets them as reflecting changing qur'ānic views of Moses. For a general survey of the reception of the Decalogue in the Qur'ān and Muslim tradition, see Sebastian Günther, "*O People of the Scripture! Come to a Word Common to You and Us* (Q. 3:64): The Ten Commandments and the Qur'an," *JQS* 9 (2008), 28–58. I have also written on the topic of the Qur'ān's reception of the Decalogue: "When Less is More: Law and Commandment in *Sūrat al-An'ām*," *JQS* 9 (2007), 22–42.

16. The monotheism commandment can be formulated, as here, with the verb *'abada* or, as in Q An'ām 6:151, with the verb *ashraka*, in both cases in the negative imperative. Sūrat al-Isrā' (17) uses, in addition, *lā taj'al*. For a complete list of formulations see the table in my "When Less is More," 33.

17. The connection between Decalogue and Covenant is only made explicit at the end of the variant version of the Decalogue in the Bible at Exod 34:27. The connection is also made elsewhere in the Qur'ān, at Q Isrā' 17:35 and at Q An'ām 6:152, both using the word *'ahd* instead of *mīthāq*. For a survey of covenant passages in the Qur'ān, see John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 2, 8–12; see also Gerhard Böwering, "Covenant," *EQ*, s.v.

18. On the divine election of the qur'ānic community, see Hamza Mahmood, "The Qur'ān's Communal Ideology: Rhetoric and Representation in Scripture and Early Historiography" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2014), 75–104. John Wansbrough wondered "whether Islamic salvation history might not more accurately be described as 'election history.'" John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 147. It is not clear that the Qur'ān's audience thought of itself as a "qur'ānic community" since the Qur'ān itself may not have aimed to reify itself as scripture, and the term "Qur'ān" may not have been understood as the (proper) noun denoting the (entirety of the)

The Covenant-Decalogue verses follow shortly after the Qur'ān's narrative elaboration in verses 67–73 of the incident described in Numbers 19:2–10, the sacrifice of a red heifer (the cow after which Sūrat al-Baqarah is named) and the use of its ashes to rectify defilement caused by a corpse.[19]

Qur'ānic restatements of the Decalogue exhibit considerable legal and legislative diversity. In some cases, they present legislation that seems designed to govern the qur'ānic community, but in other cases they function equally or even more potently as allusions to the Bible and thus as invocations of biblical authority and legitimacy.[20] I call this kind of secondary use of legislation "figurative"—it is a figuration of the idea of law and in this case of biblical law in particular. Although one should not discount the possibility that the covenantal-decalogic rules cited at Q Baqarah 2:83–84 were meant to be observed by the qur'ānic audience, those rules are presented as having been addressed to the Jews of Exodus. The criticism of the Jews for failing to adhere to the Covenant-Decalogue, despite their initial acceptance of it, suggests a contrast with a qur'ānic audience that is, or will remain, receptive to God's commands.

The Second Set of Legal Materials: Ritual and Communal Competition in Verses 142–177

The legal materials in this section, which are interspersed with other materials, include discussions of the prayer direction, pilgrimage rites, dietary rules, and then a brief reprise of the issue of the prayer direction.[21] I will discuss the

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qur'ānic text. See Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'ân's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même: Vocabulaire et argumentation du discours coranique autoréferentiel* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). That the actual qur'ānic addressees thought of themselves as a biblical community, rather than a qur'ānic community, seems more in keeping with Madigan's and Boisliveau's conclusions, with the Qur'ān's use of biblical prefiguration, and with the Qur'ān's many references to "the scripture" (*al-kitāb*).

19. The ritual sacrifice of the red cow (Hebrew *pārāh ʾădummâ*) is described as a "statute of the Torah" (*ḥuqqat ha-tôrâh*) at Num 19:2, though the qur'ānic presentation of this episode is not particularly 'legal' except perhaps for the reference to homicide in verses 72–73.

20. In my own study of the qur'ānic Decalogue I counted six "decalogic" passages in the Qur'ān, at (in descending order of length) Q Isrā' 17:22, Q An'ām 6:151, Q Baqarah 2:83–84, Q Nisā' 4:36, Q Mumtaḥanah 60:12, and Q A'rāf 7:33, and I argued that they were normative to varying degrees depending on their particular *sūrah* contexts. See generally Lowry, "When Less is More." Günther, in his article cited above, identified a few additional possible restatements of the Decalogue.

21. The matters discussed in this section pertain to ritual. Whether the qur'ānic audience perceived them as 'legal' is difficult to know; the *fiqh* tradition certainly

legal passages first, and because they are not contiguous, I will then briefly characterize the intervening and surrounding material. The text clearly signals the closure of the preceding section in verse 141 by emphasizing the transition from the lengthy retelling of biblical materials to a focus on the qur'ānic audience: "That is a people"—the Jews—"who have passed away. What they have acquired is theirs and what you"—the qur'ānic audience—"have acquired is yours. Do not ask about what they did!" (*tilka ummatun qad khalat lahā mā kasabat wa-lakum mā kasabtum wa-lā tas'alū ʿammā kānū yaʿmalūn*). The connection made between the Jews and the qur'ānic audience is part of an important theme that runs throughout the whole *sūrah*, which is the positioning of the qur'ānic audience relative to other biblical communities, especially the Jews of Genesis, Exodus, and possibly of the seventh-century Hijaz.[22] The closing verse of the preceding section (v. 141) is immediately followed by a discussion of the prayer direction.

Verses 142–152 are structured around a change in prayer direction (*qiblah*, v. 142). The obligation to face the new prayer direction appears first in verse 144, using a singular imperative, "Turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque" (*fa-walli wajhaka shaṭra'l-masjidi'l-ḥarām*) and then again using a plural imperative, "Wherever you may be, turn your faces towards it" (*wa-ḥaythu mā kuntum fa-wallū wujūhakum shaṭrah*). The language of obligation in verse 144 then reappears, slightly modified, in verse 149, "Wherever you come from, turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque" (*wa-min ḥaythu kharajta fa-walli wajhaka shaṭra'l-masjidi'l-ḥarām*), and also in verse 150, "Wherever you come from, turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque; and wherever you may be turn your faces towards it" (*wa-min ḥaythu kharajta fa-walli wajhaka shaṭra'l-masjidi'l-ḥarām wa-ḥaythu mā kuntum fa-wallū wujūhakum shaṭrah*).

These statements of obligation to face the "Sacred Mosque" are framed by a polemical account of the prayer direction and its significance. The qur'ānic audience is queried by "fools" (*al-sufahā'*) about its adoption of a new prayer direction, even though God owns east and west (v. 142, echoing v. 115).[23] The change in orientation symbolically marks the qur'ānic community as one

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treated ritual matters systematically as legislation. Because the passages in question impose specific physical (not purely mental) obligations on the qur'ānic audience I treat them as legislative.

22. Although the qur'ānic audience is here distinguished from Jews, who are a paradigmatic biblical community, the qur'ānic audience should probably also be understood within the Qur'ān as a biblical community, as suggested by Madigan (see n. 18 above).

23. The word *sufahā'* also appears in verse 13 as a label for those persons, described in some detail in verses 8-20, who only pretend to believe and who belittle religious belief of the kind enjoined by the Qur'ān. It is similarly pejorative, as used by Moses, at Q Aʿrāf 7:155. The word *sufahā'* also occurs as a legal technical term at Q Nisā'

that avoids extremes: "Thus have We made you into a community of the mean" (*ummatan wasaṭan*, v. 143). Imposition of the prior prayer orientation was a test, "so that We may know who will follow the Emissary" (v. 143). The change in prayer direction addresses uncertainty about the proper direction (*narā taqalluba wajhika fī'l-samā'*, v. 144), which is perhaps symbolic of a communal and/or spiritual reorientation. The new certainty of direction is not characteristic of other biblical communities, who disagree about the prayer direction to follow. Those communities, or their individual members (*alladhīna ūtū'l-kitāb*), may decline to be reoriented (v. 145), and some even suppress the divine truth (vv. 146–147). Verse 148 seems to suggest that each community, or perhaps each individual, has a particular orientation (*wa-li-kullin wijhatun huwa muwallīhā*, v. 148). The change in direction will leave "people… unable to marshal arguments against you" (*li-allā yakūna li'l-nāsi ʿalaykum ḥujjatun*, v. 150). The community should fear God, not others (v. 150), since God has sent an Emissary to recite the verses for them, prepare them for salvation, and teach them Scripture and Wisdom (v. 151). They should also remember God, who in turn will remember them (v. 152).

Although the passage as a whole strongly implies the invalidity of other communities' prayer directions, it does not directly condemn those other orientations. The closing verse of this whole section (v. 177) refers to the orientation for prayer in a way that perhaps leaves open the possibility that the prayer direction is community-relative: "It is not piety for you to turn your faces towards the East or West" (*laysa'l-birra an tuwallū wujūhakum qibala'l-mashriqi wa'l-maghrib*). Rather, true piety rests on the belief in some broader credal propositions: "God, the Last Day, angels, Scripture, prophets" (v. 177).[24] However that may be, the prayer direction is certainly God's to change as He likes, which seems to be the point of repeatedly proclaiming divine sovereignty over the cardinal directions (vv. 115, 142), a point perhaps echoed here in the words *al-mashriq* and *al-maghrib*.

The second legal passage in this section occurs in verse 158 and concerns the pilgrimage sites of al-Ṣafā and al-Marwah. The passage sanctions the use of these two sites as stations of the pilgrimage: they are among the "rites of God" (*min shaʿā'iri'llāh*). Given their pagan associations, however, the verse declines to make them a mandatory part of the pilgrimage and instead declares that anyone performing the *ḥajj* or *ʿumrah* pilgrimage may incorporate them without fault (*fa-lā junāḥa ʿalayhi an yaṭṭawwafa bihimā*). Further, God

4:5, where it denotes persons of diminished capacity whose financial affairs must be managed by others.

24. The list of criteria of true piety in verse 177 continues with various kinds of charity, prayer, almsgiving, upholding of the Covenant (or possibly of undertakings in general), and patience in the face of adversity.

notices when someone voluntarily does a pious deed (*man taṭawwaʿa khayran fa-innaʾllāha shākirun ʿalīm*), by which presumably is meant the inclusion of these two sites among the pilgrimage rites.[25] Both the preceding discussion of the prayer direction and this verse on the pilgrimage rite involve ritual practice as a form of drawing community boundaries. This discussion of al-Ṣafā and al-Marwah may reflect complexities relating to the separation of the qurʾānic community from its pagan environment.[26]

The third legal passage in this section concerns dietary rules and occupies verses 172–173. The dietary rules in verse 173 are foreshadowed in verse 168, which urges the qurʾānic audience to partake of the fruits of the earth, which are lawful and good (*ḥalāl ṭayyib*). This same idea is repeated, using slightly different words in verse 172: "eat of the good things that We have provided" (*kulū min ṭayyibāti mā razaqnākum*).[27] Then follows a list of dietary prohibitions in verse 173: God declares unlawful (*ḥarrama*) carrion, blood, pork, and pagan sacrifice.[28] The Qurʾān, it is suggested by this rhetoric, has come to make such rules fewer and less burdensome (a theme also found in other such lists) in comparison to the rules that govern other communities.[29] The structure of all of the Qurʾān's passages on dietary prohibitions follows

25. I acknowledge that I read this passage contrary to the *tafsīr* and *fiqh* traditions, according to which processing between these two stations is mandatory, but the use of the phrase *lā junāḥ* here ("it is not wrongful," "there is no fault") to describe processing between these two places means that their incorporation is an exception to a rule—this is clear from the exclusive use of the phrase *lā junāḥ*, always in legal contexts, to designate exceptions to legal liability twenty-five times throughout the Qurʾān as a whole. On the Qurʾān's exculpatory language, of which this verse is an example, see my article, "Exculpatory Language in the Qurʾan: A Survey of Terms, Themes, and Theologies," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–2016): 97–120, 101–102 and accompanying notes.

26. Klar, in agreement with Mehdi Bazargan, proposes that verse 158 may be structurally separate, possibly a later addition. If that is right, it may have been attracted to this location by its thematic relationship—community-defining ritual practices—to the surrounding verses on prayer direction and dietary matters. "Text-Critical Approaches; Part Two," 73–75.

27. The phrase is also addressed to Moses and/or his followers in verse 57. I recently saw this phrase addressed to me, painted on a fresh juice cart in Abu Dhabi.

28. This list echoes the Decree of the Apostles, a simplified list of dietary restrictions for the Gentile followers of Jesus found at Acts 15:20 and 15:29, which prohibits food sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, animals killed by strangulation, and blood. Elsewhere the Qurʾān prohibits eating the meat of animals that die by strangulation (Q Māʾidah 5:3) and it outlaws sexual immorality in several passages (e.g., Q Nūr 24:2) and also in some of its abbreviations of the Decalogue (Q Anʿām 6:151; compare generally Exod 20:14). On late antique debates over such lists and the Qurʾān see generally Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's Legal Culture*.

29. See especially Q Anʿām 6:145 and Q Māʾidah 5:1–5. On qurʾānic assertions

the same pattern: God's bounty is in general lawful (and delicious, *ṭayyib*), there is a small number of restrictions, and sometimes, as in verse 174, which follows this passage, it is also suggested that competing communities suppress the simplicity of God's true dietary law.[30] In a figurative reference to eating, such persons are said only to fill their stomachs with Hellfire (*mā ya'kulūna fī buṭūnihim illā'l-nār*, v. 174).

The verse that closes this whole section (v. 177), as noted above, refers back to the topic of the prayer direction, but also proposes that certain basic articles of faith—God, the Last Day, angels, Scripture, prophets[31]—and charitable generosity may carry more weight than ritual details. Perhaps the notion of a specific prayer direction is relativized here as a subtle criticism of other communities' insistence on a different prayer direction, or perhaps as a deliberate softening of the rhetoric of communal conflict and competition by way of an invitation to members of other communities to join the qur'ānic community in its commitment to God, the Last Day, Scripture, angels, prophets, and charity.

All the legal materials in this section (vv. 142–177) contribute to the theme of defining and drawing boundaries around the qur'ānic community. Prayer, pilgrimage, and diet all implicate behaviors that would have served to distinguish the qur'ānic audience ritually, and thus visibly, from neighboring, non-qur'ānic communities.[32] The sections of verses that divide these legal

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of the law's reasonableness and simplicity see, in addition to Zellentin, my article "When Less is More."

30. Although the accusation of suppression appears here in a fairly general form, involving a reference to the squandering of divine guidance, the figurative depiction of eating Hellfire suggests a connection with the immediately preceding dietary rules. The suggestion that the simplicity of the dietary laws has been suppressed is also found at Q An'ām 6:141–146. Accusations of suppression also appear in Sūrat al-Baqarah in verse 146 in relation to the *qiblah* and in verse 159 in relation to the pilgrimage.

31. A list similar to this one appears in a different context in verse 98 and also in the *sūrah*'s concluding section in verse 285.

32. The Qur'ān's treatment of prayer is complex and diverse. This section of al-Baqarah treats prayer primarily as a communal activity. Other qur'ānic injunctions to pray may imply a more individual ascetical activity (see Sūrat al-Muzzammil [73] generally and Q Isrā' 17:79). In addition, there are short prayers embedded in longer *sūrah*s, such as the short supplicatory text at the end of Sūrat al-Baqarah itself in the second half of verse 286. And of course some shorter *sūrah*s are clearly prayer texts in their entirety, such as Sūrat al-Fātiḥah and the three concluding *sūrah*s: Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, Sūrat al-Falaq, and Sūrat al-Nās. For a survey of Jewish and Christian prayer forms in the Qur'ān, including a reading of Sūrat al-Fātiḥah as an abbreviated version of the Lord's Prayer, see Anton Baumstark, "Jüdischer und christlicher Gebetstypus im Koran," *Der Islam* 16 (1927): 229–248, esp. 243–244. For an intertextual reading of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and the *shema'* (and the Nicene Creed) see Angelika Neuwirth, "The

passages from each other also emphasize the separateness of the qur'ānic audience. Verses 153–157 urge the qur'ānic audience to be patient in the face of trials which God visits on them; even those who are killed will be rewarded with eternal life (v. 154).[33] The other two groups of verses, 159–171 and 174–176, contrast somewhat with the message of patience, trial, and mercy in verses 153–157. They instead sound themes of inter-communal polemic, including denunciation of unbelief (vv. 161, 171) and paganism (v. 165), and they emphasize the need to disassociate from persons outside the community (vv. 166–167). The damnation of members of doctrinal out-groups receives especially frequent mention (vv. 160–161, 165–167, 174). Of particular interest are accusations of the suppression of revelation, which may be a tactic for legitimating new ritual procedures, in verses 146 (prayer direction), 159 (pilgrimage rites), and 174 (dietary rules).

The Neo-Covenantal Code: 2:178–203 and 215–242

The phrase *yā ayyuhā'lladhīna āmanū* ("Believers!" or "O you who believe!", v. 178) marks, as it frequently does elsewhere in this *sūrah* and elsewhere in the Qur'ān, the inception of a new section that contains two detailed lists of legislation for the qur'ānic audience.[34] These lists form the legislative heart of Sūrat al-Baqarah. Although the previous section (vv. 142–177) contained material that I would identify as legal, this section (vv. 178–203, 215–242) is straightforwardly legislative and thus distinct from the preceding section in tone, lexicon, and theme. The previous section exhibited themes of communal boundary drawing, though possibly tempered by a mild ritual relativism and antinomianism. The two lists in this new section are relentlessly legislative and evince a much more prescriptive and technical legal lexicon.[35]

Qur'an as an Exegetical Text," in Bruno De Nicola, Yonatan Mendel, and Husain Qutbuddin (eds.), *Reflections on Knowledge and Language in Middle Eastern Societies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 134–152, 149–151. For a general survey of the evolution of prayer in the Qur'ān, see Gerhard Böwering, "Prayer," *EQ*, s.v.

33. The claim that those killed in battle are not really dead ties in with assertions later in the *sūrah* that God has the power to resurrect the dead. See verses 243, 258–260.

34. Several other verses in the *sūrah* begin with this phrase (vv. 104, 153, 172, 183, 208, 264, 267, 278), and it marks the beginning of smaller structural units at verses 254 and 282 and also at verse 21 in the variation *yā ayyuhā'l-nās*. On the structural role of the phrase *yā banī isrā'īl*, see n. 56 below.

35. As presented by Mustansir Mir, the Pakistani Qur'ān scholar Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī identifies verse 163 as the beginning of the main legal passage in Sūrat al-Baqarah. See Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 109. I think that the legislative ambivalence in the dietary rules and the final reference to the prayer direction, in verses 172 (and

The language of obligation in these two lists uses certain key terms and formulations especially frequently, and most often at the beginning of a verse, to signal the regulatory mood: assertions of prescription (*kutiba ʿalaykum*), responsa formulae (e.g., *yasʾalūnaka*), imperatives and negative imperatives, conditional sentences, language of impersonal obligation (*alladhīna* + verb), verbs of lawfulness and unlawfulness (*uḥilla*, *ḥarrama*), and exculpatory clauses. In fact, these legal turns of phrase constitute much of the core of the Qurʾān's language of obligation across the whole text. Even when such phrases do not mark a verse at its inception, the repetition of key nouns and verbs with an obvious legal valence serves the same function as the non-topic specific legal turns of phrase. The two passages' density of use of legal terminology can be seen clearly in Tables 1 and 2 below.

The first list, from verses 178 to 203, divides naturally into two unequal parts. The first, shorter section, which sets out rules governing the tort of homicide, inheritance, and fasting (vv. 178–187), is tied together by three occurrences of the obligation-engendering phrase *kutiba ʿalaykum* (vv. 178, 180, 183). The second, lengthier section (vv. 188–203), dealing with financial propriety, bribery, the ritual function of new moons, the ethics of visiting, legitimate warfare, and the pilgrimage, coheres through the frequent deployment of imperative verbs (e.g., *qātilū*, *anfiqū*, *atimmū*, *faʾdhkurū*; vv. 190, 195, 196, 200). A few other typical qurʾānic terms of legal obligation are sprinkled in as well, such as *uḥilla* (v. 187) and *yasʾalūnaka* (v. 189). In this whole section, fasting, pilgrimage, and warfare receive the most extensive treatments.

The second long list of obligations stretches from verses 215 to 242. It also falls into two divisions in a way very similar to the first list. A shorter first section (vv. 215–222), covering contributions to the cause, warfare, vice, orphans, marriage, and menstruation, achieves a tight structure through repetition of the phrase *yasʾalūnaka ʿan* to introduce individual rules. The second, longer subsection of this list, which covers oaths, divorce, weaning, widowhood, marriage proposals, prayer, and wills, displays its coherence through repetition of various words and phrases. These repeated elements include imperative verbs, many terms relating to dissolution of marriage and derived from the root *ṭ-l-q*, the exculpatory phrase *lā junāḥ*, and the phrase *waʾlladhīna yutawaffawna minkum*. If anything, the density of legal language in this passage, even judged solely by the verse inceptions, is even higher than that in verses 178–203.

The two long lists are themselves tied together by shared legal subject matter and vocabulary (contributions, warfare, and wills), as well as legal rhetoric (the phrases *kutiba ʿalaykum*, *yasʾalūnaka*, *lā junāḥ*, the use of imperative

following verses) and 177, display a markedly different mood than the decisively normative material that begins at verse 178.

Table 1. Legal density by verse inceptions and topic, Sūrat al-Baqarah, verses 178–203.

Verse	Legal Language	Legal Topic
178	*yā ayyuhā'lldhīna āmanū kutiba ʿalaykumu'l-qiṣāṣ*	torts
179		torts
180	*kutiba ʿalaykum… al-waṣīyah*	wills
181		wills
182		wills
183	*yā ayyuhā'lladhīna āmanū kutiba ʿalaykumu'l-ṣiyām*	fasting
184		fasting
185		fasting
186	*idhā sa'alaka*	(theology)
187	*uḥilla lakum… al-rafathu*	fasting
188	*lā ta'kulū*	finance, bribery
189	*yas'alūnaka ʿani'l-ahillah*	pilgrimage; privacy
190	*wa-qātilū*	war
191	*wa'qtulūhum*	war
192		war
193	*wa-qātilūhum*	war
194		war
195	*wa-anfiqū*	contributions
196	*wa-atimmū'l-ḥajja wa'l-ʿumrah*	pilgrimage
197		pilgrimage
198	*laysa ʿalaykum junāḥ*	pilgrimage
199	*thumma afīḍū*	pilgrimage
200	*fa-idhā qaḍaytum manāsikakum fa'dhkurū'llāh*	pilgrimage
201		(theology)
202		(theology)
203	*wa'dhkurū'llāh*	pilgrimage

verbs, and the use seven times of the phrase *ḥudūd Allāh*, God's limits, to describe some of the individual rules, especially in the area of divorce law). The few non-legislative verses in these two lists also exhibit a thematic unity. In them God is portrayed as responsive to human endeavor. He responds to prayer (vv. 188, 201–202, perhaps especially in the context of the pilgrimage

Table 2. Legal density by verse inceptions and topic, Sūrat al-Baqarah, verses 215–242.

Verse	Legal Language	Legal Topic
215	*yasʾalūnaka mādhā yunfiqūn*	contributions, charity
216	*kutiba ʿalaykumu'l-qitāl*	war
217	*yasʾalūnaka ʿani'l-shahri'l-ḥarāmi qitālin fīh*	war
218		piety
219	*yasʾalūnaka ʿani'l-khamri wa'l-maysir… wa-yasʾalūnaka mādhā yunfiqūn*	wine, gambling, contributions
220	*wa-yasʾalūnaka ʿani'l-yatāmā*	orphans
221	*wa-lā tankiḥū'l-mushrikāt*	family law
222	*wa-yasʾalūnaka ʿani'l-maḥīḍ*	sex, purity
223		sex
224	*wa-lā taǰʿalū'llāha ʿurḍah*	oaths
225		oaths
226		divorce oath
227	*wa-in ʿazamū'l-ṭalāq*	divorce
228	*wa'l-muṭallaqāt*	divorce
229	*al-ṭalāqu marratān*	divorce
230	*fa-in ṭallaqahā*	divorce
231	*wa-idhā ṭallaqtumu'l-nisāʾ*	divorce
232	*wa-idhā ṭallaqtumu'l-nisāʾ*	divorce
233		weaning, alimony, etc.
234	*wa'lladhīna yutawaffawna minkum*	widows' remarriage
235	*wa-lā junāḥa ʿalaykum*	marriage proposals
236	*lā junāḥa ʿalaykum in ṭallaqtum*	divorce, alimony
237	*wa-in ṭallaqtumūhunna*	divorce, alimony
238	*ḥāfiẓū ʿalā… al-ṣalāti'l-wusṭā*	prayer times?
239		prayer in danger
240	*wa'lladhīna yutawaffawna minkum*	wills, widows
241	*wa-li'l-muṭallaqāt*	divorce, alimony
242	*ka-dhālika yubayyinu'llāhu lakum āyātih*	conclusion

in both cases), and is ready to reward those who believe, emigrate, and struggle in God's path (v. 218, perhaps especially in the context of war).

Both lists also resonate with legal and non-legal themes found elsewhere in the *sūrah*. Changing the terms of a will after the testator's death (*fa-man baddalahu*, v. 181), unless the will is manifestly unfair, is declared a sin (*ithm*, v. 181). The idea of the "sinful exchange" is a theme in this *sūrah*. The sinful exchange of God's grace for something worse (e.g., *man yubaddil niʿmata'llāh*, v. 211) is expressly denounced three times in Sūrat al-Baqarah (vv. 59, 61, 211) and the exchange of faith for unbelief (*īmān*, *kufr*) is denounced once (v. 108). Another possible intra-*sūrah* link emerges from the injunction to observe the "middle prayer" in verse 238 (*ḥāfiẓū ʿalā'l-ṣalāti wa'l-ṣalāti'l-wusṭā*). Although the *fiqh* and *tafsīr* traditions often construe the phrase *al-ṣalāt al-wusṭā* as referring to one of the five daily prayers,[36] one might relate it to the idea of the "community of the mean," *ummatan wasaṭan,* in v. 143. This connection is made plausible by the repeated attempts throughout the *sūrah* to position the qurʾānic community relative to other biblical communities, and especially the references to conflict and competing prayer directions discussed above (vv. 142–152 and 177). The qurʾānic community is the golden mean, their prayer direction is neither east nor west, and their prayer practice lies at a point of equilibrium between two disapproved extremes. Of course, in this case, we should not exclude the possibility that the Qurʾān engages in wordplay and thus refers both to a mid-day prayer as well as to a satisfying ritual positioning of the qurʾānic community.[37] A more legal intra-*sūrah* connection appears in the suggestion to give charitably over and above the requirements imposed on those who miss the fast, in the phrase *fa-man taṭawwaʿa khayran fa-huwa khayrun lah* (v. 184), which echoes the positive portrayal of visiting the optional pilgrimage stations of al-Ṣafā and al-Marwah: *wa-man taṭawwaʿa khayran fa-inna'llāha shākirun ʿalīm* (v. 158). Finally, verse 189 defines piety, *birr*, as the observance of a household's right to privacy. In verse 177, *birr* is defined in broadly credal terms and the word also appears in verse 44 in a reproach to the Jews.

36. It is mostly thought, including by al-Ṭabarī (citing the preponderance of *ḥadīth*s), to refer to the *ʿaṣr* (afternoon) prayer, which is the middle prayer of the five daily prayers, though a few of the reports cited by al-Ṭabarī hold that it refers to others of the five prayers, and a very few hold that it refers to a prayer other than the five prayers. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (16 vols. [incomplete]; Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1954–1969), 5.221. On the evolution of the number of daily prayers, see Böwering, "Prayer."

37. Robinson identifies the portrayal of the qurʾānic community as the moderate alternative to extremes as possibly the main theme of the *sūrah*. See *Discovering the Qur'an*, 201–223, esp. 201 and 210–211. Reda agrees with Farrin that verse 143 constitutes the structural mid-point of the *sūrah*; *The al-Baqara Crescendo*, 102.

The entire section comprising the two long lists of obligations is arguably brought to a close with the phrase "thus does God explain his signs to you" (*ka-dhālika yubayyinu'llāh lakum āyātihi*, v. 242). This phrase appears after several other rules in the two long legislative sections just discussed (vv. 187, 219, 221, 242, 266) as well as in other *sūrah*s.[38]

The Last Legal Passages: Q 2:261–283

The last collection of legal verses in Sūrat al-Baqarah begins diffusely with variously formulated suggestions that the qurʾānic audience should contribute to the cause, picking up on a theme that appears in verse 254. The injunction to give is expressed variously (including parabolically at vv. 261 and 265), and oscillates between charity (vv. 263, 271, 273), communal defense (or offense, vv. 261–262), and a few verses that lie between the two.[39] The war propaganda of the preceding section (vv. 243–260, discussed below) is surely meant to condition one's understanding of the verses on contributions.

In verses 275–276, the legal topic changes to the prohibition of usury and, in the following verses, to related matters of commercial law.[40] Usury (*ribā*) leads to perdition. It is forbidden and not the same as profit from a sale of goods, which is licit (*aḥalla'llāhu'l-bayʿa wa-ḥarrama'l-ribā*, v. 275). However, pre-qurʾānic usurious transactions are grandfathered (*fa-lahu mā salafa*). After a brief interlude in which it is said that God only increases alms, not

38. In Sūrat al-Baqarah the phrase follows a rule or set of rules in every instance except in verse 266. Elsewhere in the Qurʾān the phrase sometimes follows legislation (e.g., Q Nisāʾ 4:176, with slightly different wording) and sometimes not (e.g., Q Āl ʿImrān 3:103). What the phrase actually means is another matter. In this case (v. 242), I understand it to mean something like "*Those* are the laws I am revealing to you." However, the verb *yubayyinu* and the word *āyah* could be translated in other ways that would give several other possibilities, such as "Thus does God manifest his miraculous signs for you," which could refer to the general miraculousness of, for example, the form and content of the foregoing rules; or "*Thus* does God manifest his verses for you," meaning "God communicates important information to you by means of *this* text." Al-Ṭabarī paraphrases verse 242 (and I paraphrase him) to mean: Just as I have already clarified (*bayyantu*) rulings about family law and other rights and obligations, I will (later?) clarify the rest of the rulings for you (*ubayyinu lakum sāʾir al-aḥkām*) in verses that I have revealed to My Prophet. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 5.265–266.

39. I understand many of the references to "contributions" (*nafaqāt*, *anfiqū*, *alladhīna yunfiqūna*, etc.) in Sūrat al-Baqarah as being connected with the defense of the community, especially its military defense, but in this section (and elsewhere in the *sūrah*), the verb *anfaqa* (spend) overlaps semantically with *ṣadaqāt*, so with charitable giving.

40. Other usury prohibitions occur at Q Āl ʿImrān 3:130, Q Nisāʾ 4:161, and Q Rūm 30:39.

profits from usury, and in which good works are urged (vv. 277–278), the holders of usurious debts are allowed to recover their principal if they forgo the usurious elements of the transaction (v. 279), and are further urged to allow postponement of repayment and to forgo part of the debt (v. 280), and to keep the Last Judgment in mind (v. 281). Note here the 'technical' commercial aspect of this discussion: sales and usury are distinguished; pre-qur'ānic transactions are grandfathered; and certain ameliorative measures are urged on holders of debt that might be deemed usurious (though usury itself is never defined here or elsewhere in the Qur'ān).

The commercial framing of the usury prohibition is then followed by an unusually lengthy verse (v. 282) in which various matters relating to indebtedness are discussed. It is urged that debt contracts be written by a scribe. The debtor should dictate but not reduce the amount owed, and a guardian should dictate if the debtor has diminished capacity. Witnesses should attest to these arrangements, presumably to the amount of the debt and the time period involved, though parties to a present exchange of goods are exempted from this rule.[41] In verse 283, which concludes this topic and this whole section as well, those who are traveling and find no scribe are urged to give a security deposit and, if they use a trustee for such deposit, the trustee is urged to deliver it (presumably in case of default).

What gives this whole legislative section (vv. 261–283) conceptual coherence is the link between contributions, charity, usury, and indebtedness. Charity and usury are polemically linked in the Qur'ān, and portrayed as opposites, with usury being a false gain and charity being a true gain; that is, their economic and moral realities stand in an inverse relationship (as also at Q Rūm 30:39). Usury, in turn, is connected also with indebtedness and is in fact understood by the commentators to refer paradigmatically to the granting of an extension to a debtor for an increase in the debt itself.[42] The rules for reducing debts to writing presumably aim in part to prevent exploitative usurious transactions. Charity (including material contributions), usury, and indebtedness are thus closely connected both legally and morally, and therefore also conceptually. It is noteworthy that the legal content of this section becomes increasingly detailed right up through verse 283.

41. Leicht gives a detailed analysis of verse 282 in "The Qur'anic Commandment of Writing Down Loan Agreements" that is enriched through comparison with rabbinic and Roman law (see n. 7 above).

42. See, e.g., al-Wāḥidī's report about al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib and ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān as doing just that in regard to an extension of credit. Abū'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1411 [1991]), 96 (*ad* 2:278).

Prayer and Almsgiving

One recurring injunction to the qur'ānic audience that I have not yet discussed in detail is the command to pray, which appears at various points throughout the *sūrah*. It is usually accompanied by a command to give alms. This dual injunction is frequently expressed in the Qur'ān, and in Sūrat al-Baqarah, by the phrase *aqīmū'l-ṣalāta wa-ātū'l-zakāt* ("hold prayers and give alms!") (vv. 43, 83, 110), which uses the imperative, and also, in this *sūrah*, by the variants *wa-aqāma'l-ṣalāta wa-ātā'l-zakāt* (v. 177) and *aqāmū'l-ṣalāta wa-ātū'l-zakāt* (v. 277), which use perfect verbs. This recurring formula is certainly 'legal' according to the criteria used in this study. It is frequent enough in the Qur'ān as a whole to be considered a kind of refrain. In Sūrat al-Baqarah, holding prayers and giving charitably appear in verse 3 as the characteristics of the God-fearing (*al-muttaqīn*, v. 2) believers in the unseen (*alladhīna yu'minūna bi'l-ghayb*, v. 3), who accept both what is revealed to the *sūrah*'s addressee and also previous revelations (*alladhīna yu'minūna bi-mā unzila ilayka wa-mā unzila min qablika*), and who are certain of the Hereafter (*wa-bi'l-ākhirati hum yūqinūn*, v. 4). It is a shorthand definition of the qur'ānic audience. More detailed expositions of the obligations to pray and to give charitably appear in whate I call the "Neo-Covenantal Code" and in the beginning of the *sūrah*'s final legislative section, respectively (vv. 238, 261–274).

Summing Up the Law in Sūrat al-Baqarah

Sūrat al-Baqarah has several different legal passages, each with distinctive features. They begin with a reference to the biblical Covenant and Decalogue (vv. 83–84). Next comes a series of rules governing ritual practices of the qur'ānic audience (vv. 142–177). These are followed by two closely related passages that legislate on very specific topics relating to the civil and ritual life of the qur'ānic audience (vv. 178–203, 215–242). I call these two passages the "Neo-Covenantal Code." A final legal passage connects charity, contributions for communal defense, usury, and lawful extensions of credit, in a discussion that becomes increasingly technical (vv. 261–283). With these legal topics and their distribution in mind, it is now time to consider the narrative arc of the *sūrah*, to see what role the legal passages play in the *sūrah*'s structure.

The Form and Structure of Sūrat al-Baqarah

Sūrat al-Baqarah's structure has been described in a number of modern studies, which, however, do not always agree in their understanding of the *sūrah*'s overall form or in their attempts to divide it into thematically

coherent sections (see Table 3 below).[43] The main formal divisions in the *sūrah* are indicated primarily by changes in topic, and secondarily—and not consistently—by repetition of certain phrases or linguistic markers. The complexity of the relationship between thematic sections and prominent instances of linguistic repetition, between content and form, is one of the aspects of Sūrat al-Baqarah and other of the Qur'ān's *sūrah*s that makes an analysis of their form a challenge.[44] My own understanding of the *sūrah*'s structure is connected to my analysis of the *sūrah*'s legal content; a focus on other (non-legal) aspects of the *sūrah* could well lead to other valid approaches to its form.

Whether Sūrat al-Baqarah was performed as a whole, performed in separate parts, fashioned somehow from pre-existing materials, or resulted from some combination of those or other compositional processes, my working assumption is that it exhibits not only a general structural coherence but also a certain linearity. For the purposes of this study, I divide the *sūrah* into five sections: the theological introduction (vv. 1–29), a retelling of biblical narratives with an interlude (vv. 30–141), a section on communal identity and inter-communal polemic (vv. 142–177), a three-part legislative section with two interludes (vv. 178–283), and a closing section (vv. 284–286).[45] Each of these sections can be further subdivided into coherent sub-units, and there are a number of passages that evince clear thematic or linguistic connections across or between the five sections and their constituent subsections. Even though many of the *sūrah*'s thematic and linguistic elements at the level of the subsections contribute to the *sūrah*'s overall structural coherence, it is important not to lose sight of the larger structural divisions (the five sections just outlined).

I now provide a very brief synopsis of each section. It would be possible to say much, much more about many different and interesting aspects of each section, but I want to indicate their shape only in a very general way in order to relate them to the legal passages that have been discussed in detail above.

43. The two articles by Klar cited herein provide a detailed comparison of previous structurally oriented studies of Sūrat al-Baqarah.

44. The two articles by Klar cited herein could be read as an extended rumination on this very point.

45. These five sections could possibly, in regard to length and content, be understood as exhibiting a chiastic structure: A = opening; B = Bible stories; C = communal identity; B′ = legislation; A′ = closing. Other valid structurings are no doubt possible.

Opening (vv. 1–29)

The first twenty verses, after emphasizing the importance of scripture, compare the non-believers (unfavorably) to the believers in various respects, a comparison that concludes with two parables (*mathaluhum*, vv. 17–20). A subdivision is indicated by the address formula *yā ayyuhā'l-nās* in verse 21 and a change from the third-person description of non-believers to a second-person address to the believers. Believers are urged to worship God, doubters of the revelation are urged to bring a *sūrah* like it, good works are said to lead to Paradise, the unbelievers are briefly described, and the section closes in verses 28 and 29 with a hymn-like praise of God the Creator that in its tone echoes verse 22.

Bible Stories (vv. 30–141)

The section of the *sūrah* that runs from verse 30 to 140 has three main subsections: retellings of the stories of the Creation and the Exodus, featuring Adam and Moses (vv. 30–71); an intervening polemical section with biblical references (vv. 72–123); and a portrayal of Abraham and Ishmael as builders of a temple (vv. 124–141). The whole section's inception is clearly signaled by the qur'ānic marker of narrative and especially biblical narrative, *idh* followed by a perfect verb, here *qāla* (v. 30). There follows a narrative about Adam, the angels and the Fall (vv. 30–39). In verse 40, it emerges that the Bible stories are being retold to the Jews to illustrate the Jews' failure to abide by the covenant (e.g., v. 74).[46] Next follows a retelling of the Exodus narrative that mentions the parting of the Red Sea (vv. 49–50), the Golden Calf (vv. 50–51), the miraculous finding of food and water in the desert (vv. 60–61), and the red heifer (*baqarah*) after which the *sūrah* is named (vv. 67–71).

After the Exodus narrative, the address to the Jews becomes prominent and frames (as noted above) an abbreviation of the Decalogue and reference to the Covenant (vv. 83–84). The Jews are described unfavorably in various ways, and their failure to follow Moses and his successors (such as Jesus) and abide by the Covenant is emphasized (e.g., vv. 87, 92–93). Christians and Jews both are claimed to have wrongly exclusivist views of salvation (vv. 111–113). Although the biblical narrative pauses, biblical references are dense in this section and include, in addition to those just mentioned, the following: verse 88 accuses the Jews of having uncircumcised hearts, verse 91 accuses them of killing the prophets, and verse 97 accuses them of being enemies of the angel Gabriel. These charges repeat or reflect the anti-Jewish polemics of

46. On the thematic and structural relationship between the Adam and Moses narratives in Sūrat al-Baqarah, see n. 56 below.

Acts 7:51–53, which themselves also refer to certain passages in the Hebrew Bible.[47] Verse 93 (and Q Nisāʾ 4:46) has the Jews say in regard to the Covenant "*samiʿnā wa-ʿaṣaynā*" ("we hear and disobey"), which is a play on the words of the Hebrew Bible in Deuteronomy 5:23, where Moses's followers pledge to "hear and act" in accordance with what God tells Moses on Sinai, "*šāmaʿnû wĕʿāśînû*," and possibly an even more direct reference to the phrase "we will act and hear" (*naʿăśeh wĕnišmāʿ*), in Exodus 24:7, where it expressly pertains to the Covenant (*bərît*).[48] Verse 93 refers to the Jews being forced to "drink" the Golden Calf, which Moses makes them do at Exodus 32:20. This interlude closes with an assertion that the Jews and Christians are unlikely to accept Muḥammad (v. 120), and that following scripture and reciting it correctly lead to salvation (v. 121).

The final part of this section, introduced by the frame marker *yā banī isrāʾīl* (v. 122), briefly portrays Abraham and Ishmael as builders of the temple (*al-bayt*) (vv. 124–127) and then characterizes Abraham and his lineal and spiritual descendants—Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus—as being neither Jewish nor Christian but instead *ḥanīf*s and *muslimūn* (vv. 135–136). The phrase "that is a people who have passed away" (*tilka ummatun qad khalat*), presumably a reference to the Jews and possibly to other pre-qurʾānic biblical communities, appears in verse 134 and is repeated at verse 141, where it closes this section.

This whole section (vv. 30–141) is a retelling of parts of the creation narrative from Genesis, of the Exodus narrative, and a selective mention of patriarchs and other significant biblical figures. It thus abbreviates and rearranges, but unmistakably presents, a highly condensed version of narrative content from Genesis and Exodus. This retelling is a polemical one, ostensibly directed at the Jews, to illustrate their failure to uphold the Covenant. The Jews are directly addressed at the beginning of verses 40, 47, and 122 (*yā banī isrāʾīl*) where they are enjoined to remember the favor that God showed them. The Covenant is referred to with the terms *ʿahd* or *mīthāq* eight times between verses 40 and 124, with emphasis usually placed on its breach by the Jews. Its breach is referred to in verse 27 using both terms.

47. See, e.g., Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 401.

48. The striking correspondence with Deuteronomy was (I believe) first noticed by Hirschfeld, who claimed it represented Muḥammad's misunderstanding of the Hebrew Bible. Hirschfeld, *Beiträge*, 63; see also Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 301–302, who understands the passage as an instance of the Jews making fun of Muḥammad by deliberately misquoting the Hebrew Bible. In context, it seems clear that it is a deliberate play on words that contributes to this passage's anti-Jewish polemic.

Communal Identity and Inter-Communal Polemic (vv. 142–177)

I have discussed this whole passage in detail above with reference to its legal content. The important point to note is that the legal material that appears in it concerns ritual and is embedded in a discussion of intra-communal identity and inter-communal conflict. Verse 142 is also arguably a turning point in the *sūrah* at which the focus moves away from the biblical past and turns increasingly to the qur'ānic present, and at which the qur'ānic audience moves increasingly from the narrative frame to the center of the narrative.

Interludes between Sūrat al-Baqarah's Main Legislative Passages: Communal Conflict and War Propaganda (vv. 204–214, 243–260)

Above I described the three concentrated sets of legislation in the *sūrah*. The first two sets of legislation (vv. 178–203, 215–242, the Neo-Covenantal Code) are highly congruent in their rhetoric and legal content. The third such passage (vv. 260–283) has a more diffuse beginning, but concludes with a relatively technical set of rules on contracts and indebtedness. I now discuss the two passages that intervene between these three legislative sections.

The two long lists of rules are separated by a three-part interlude at vv. 204–214. Verses 204–207 distinguish those who act hypocritically from those who sacrifice themselves for God's favor. Verses 208–212 urge the audience to stay on course and accept the divine message, and they also refer to the Jews' rejection of that message. The last two verses (vv. 213–214) describe the disintegration of the *ummah* in the past—whether it is a primordial *ummah* or a specific prior biblical community is unclear—because of disagreements over the divine message, the need to have faith in its messenger and in salvation in the face of adversity, and the imminent prospect of divine victory (*naṣr Allāh*). The last two sections of this interlude make reference to biblical communities, the rejection and acceptance of the divine message, and the *ummah*—all themes that feature prominently throughout the *sūrah*.

Notwithstanding the formula in verse 242 that marks the conclusion of the second main legislative passage ("thus does God explain his signs"), the ending of this section of legal material is complexly interlaced with the following material that intervenes between it and the *sūrah*'s final collection of legal materials (at vv. 263–283). One might argue, for example, that the series of rules resumes at verse 244 with the injunction, "fight in God's cause!" (*qātilū fī sabīli'llāh*), and only then transitions to the section that intervenes between this and the next set of legal verses. However, verses 243, 246, and 258 offer a series of three exempla that illustrate the themes of communal conflict and perseverance, all beginning with the phrase *a-lam tara* ("Have you not considered…?"). Because the first of these exempla precedes the

imperative *qātilū* in verse 244, I think the text supports the conclusion that verse 243 initiates a new section.

The first exemplum introduced by the phrase *a-lam tara*, at verses 243–245, describes persons who fled their homes and whom God promises to resurrect, echoing 2:85, discussed earlier in connection with the *hijrah* and Exodus. The qur'ānic audience is then, as noted already, enjoined to battle and also to make a loan to God, who will repay it many times over (v. 245). Verses 246–252, in the next section introduced by *a-lam tara*, compare the qur'ānic audience to the Jews after the Exodus. The story of Saul and David's victory over Goliath while outnumbered is retold, and the reluctance of the Jews to fight, despite their expulsion from Egypt, noted. The section closes with a reference to God's assistance to Jesus and the assertion that God could prevent violent conflict, but often chooses not to do so (v. 253). In the final *exemplum* introduced by *a-lam tara*, Abraham prevails over an unnamed opponent in a debate about God's power (v. 258). There is then a parable about God's power to resurrect, and then Abraham asks God to show him how He resurrects the dead and God obliges by restoring life to a dismembered bird (v. 260).

Interwoven with these short narratives are injunctions to battle as noted above, as well as several verses encouraging the qur'ānic audience to give to the cause (vv. 245, 254). The themes of expulsion, war, war contributions, self-sacrifice, resurrection, and victory against overwhelming odds all add up to war propaganda. In context, the celebrated assertion that there is no compulsion in religion in verse 256 (*lā ikrāha fī'l-dīn*) sounds fairly ominous and one suspects that what is meant is that if one disbelieves, or declines to fight, it is at one's peril.[49] God, it is then said, will bring His followers into the light (v. 257). The martial theme is foreshadowed in verse 154, where it is said that the war dead are not really dead, but in fact alive, and it is surely also relevant that both Saul's army and the very last sentence of the *sūrah* beseech God to "grant us victory over the unbelieving people" (*unṣurnā ʿalā'l-qawmi'l-kāfirīn*, vv. 250, 286).

49. Patricia Crone reads verse 256, cautiously, only in the context of verses 255–257 and concludes that it reflects the late antique Christian (and early Islamic) idea that religious choice reflects the individual's conscience. Patricia Crone, "'No Compulsion in Religion': Q. 2:256 in Medieval and Modern Interpretation," in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Meir M. Bar-Asher, and Simon Hopkins (eds.), *Le shīʿisme imāmite quarante ans après: Hommage* à *Etan Kohlberg* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 131–178, esp. 164–169. I think the wider qur'ānic context in which the verse appears suggests a more pessimistic interpretation, though the anecdotes in al-Wāḥidī could be interpreted to support Crone's reading. See *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, 85–86.

Closing (vv. 284–286)

The *sūrah*'s closing section contains a brief hymn, a doxology, and a prayer.[50] The prayer, in verse 286, is of interest because of its invocation of legal themes and especially of the ideas of legal capacity and responsibility. Verse 284 is a short hymn emphasizing God's sovereignty over the universe, omniscience, and role as forgiver and punisher. Verse 285 is a short catechism that mentions belief in revelation, God, angels, Scripture, and messengers—it echoes the articles of belief set out in verses 98 and 177. Verse 286 has two parts. In the first half, God's fairness is emphasized. The second part is a supplication asking the Lord (*rabbanā*) to make the community's burden reasonable in comparison to that of their predecessors, to make their burden in accordance with their capacity, to be forgiving and merciful, and finally to give them victory over the non-believers. It is tempting, from a thematic point of view, to construe the verse's first half as referring in part to the *sūrah*'s legal materials, especially those from verse 178 on. The verse contains specific references to obligations, capacity, judgment, and pardon:

lā yukallifu'llāhu nafsan illā wusʿahā
lahā mā kasabat wa-ʿalayhā mā'ktasabat
rabbanā lā tu'ākhidhnā in nasīnā aw akhṭa'nā
rabbanā wa-lā taḥmil ʿalaynā iṣran kamā ḥamaltahu ʿalā'lladhīna min qablinā
rabbanā wa-lā tuḥammilnā mā lā ṭāqata lanā bihi
wa'fu ʿannā wa'ghfir lanā wa'ṛḥamnā anta mawlānā
fa'nṣurnā ʿalā'l-qawmi'l-kāfirīn

God does not impose responsibility on anyone in excess of their capacity.
People acquire reward or earn liability only for themselves.
O Lord: Do not punish us if we are forgetful or err.
O Lord: Do not impose on us the burden that you imposed on those who went before us.
O Lord: Do not burden us with tasks we are unable to perform.
Pardon us, forgive us, show us mercy—You are our Master.
Grant us victory over the unbelieving people.

On a lexical level, the last phrase, asking for victory over enemies and using the verb *fa'nṣurnā*, repeats the supplication in verse 250 by Saul's army for aid against Goliath (*wa'nṣurnā ʿalā'l-qawmi'l-kāfirīn*). It also recalls the reference to divinely-aided victory in verse 214 (*matā naṣru'llāh a-lā naṣru'llāhi qarīb*)

50. Zahniser emphasizes the formal aspects of the division between verses 283 and 284, but the thematic transition from technical commercial legislation to the hymnic *li'llāh mā fī'l-samāwāt wa-mā fī'l-arḍ* is to my mind the most conspicuous aspect of this section border. Zahniser, "Major Transitions," 30, 32.

between the two halves of the Neo-Covenantal Code and may also reinforce the themes of intra-communal solidarity and inter-communal conflict that were connected with legal requirements relating to matters of ritual in verses 142–177.[51]

Sūrat al-Baqarah as a Whole: Coherence and Composition

Structure

The legal materials in Sūrat al-Baqarah ought to be distinguished according to context and function. The direct references to Covenant and Decalogue invoke the idea of biblical law and prepare the qur'ānic audience for a detailed exposition of legal matters later in the *sūrah*. The ritual material scattered across verses 142–177 helps define the contours of the new community, in part by regulating various kinds of community-defining practices. The two concentrated lists of legislation (vv. 178–203, 215–242) that I am calling the Neo-Covenantal Code offer a set of rules that on a literary level constitute a likely or plausible set of statutes to govern a new biblical community. It is certainly possible that they were understood not merely figuratively, as plausibly neo-biblical legislation that constituted a new covenant for a biblical community, but simultaneously as actual rules designed to be implemented, followed, and enforced—the laws from Sinai reimagined as positive legislation for the qur'ānic community.[52] While Sūrat al-Baqarah does not expressly characterize these legislative passages as constituting a new covenant, this is the qur'ānic *sūrah* in which the Covenant (*ʿahd*, *mīthāq*) is mentioned most frequently, and the Covenant is expressly and repeatedly thematized in the first 177 verses of the *sūrah*.[53]

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51. Reda finds a "crescendo" in the *sūrah*'s final three verses, verses 284–286 and considers them the culmination of and epilogue to the *sūrah*. For an example, see *The al-Baqara Crescendo*, 190–191. It is difficult to integrate the detailed rules for drawing up contracts of indebtedness into such an interpretation, though the final verse's supplication to grant the qur'ānic community victory over its enemies could provide the climax to a sustained theme of communal conflict and divinely aided martial endeavor.

52. I treat these two passages, the Neo-Covenantal Code, as an integral, organic structural feature of the *sūrah*. The origins of the individual rules that constitute this code are attributed by Muslim tradition to discrete, specific events in the life of the Medinan qur'ānic community. See, e.g., al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, 52–85.

53. The word *ʿahd* appears in the sense of "Covenant" in verses 27, 40, 80 (twice), 100, and 124, and in verse 177 in a way that at least resonates with the theme of Covenant. The word *mīthāq* appears in the sense of "Covenant" in verses 27, 63, 83, 84, and 93. The verb *ʿāhadnā*, with God as subject, appears in relation to Moses and

The two legislative lists thus recapitulate and expand on the earlier reference to Covenant and Decalogue in verses 83–84.[54] As laws given by a prophet to his community, they reinforce the simultaneous retelling of Exodus (biblical narrative as figuration of the qurʾānic audience) and re-enactment of Exodus (expulsion and then election of the qurʾānic audience).

The one legal element that is difficult to account for in this biblicizing overview of the *sūrah*'s form and content is the commercial legislation in verses 261–283. Although the legal materials in this section are conceptually related to each other, they do not directly reinforce the themes of Covenant and Decalogue or of communal identity formation, and they do not exhibit the tight rhetorical structure of the two main lists of civil and ritual legislation. They instead begin diffusely and become, at the end, markedly technical. I would argue that, by the end of the discussion of usurious transactions, they also impede the *sūrah*'s narrative momentum.

In Table 3 I offer a schematic outline of Sūrat al-Baqarah in which I attempt to take due account of the *sūrah*'s legal materials. For comparison's sake, I provide outlines of some other recent interpretations of the *sūrah*'s structure.[55] I consider the *sūrah* to be an address to the qurʾānic audience that makes use of materials from Genesis and Exodus to prefigure the qurʾānic audience. There is a major turning point in the *sūrah*, at verse 142, where the focus turns to the qurʾānic audience, first to distinguishing aspects of its ritual life, then to the Neo-Covenantal Code that governs its civil and ritual obligations, and finally to communal defense.

My schematization in Table 3 aims to show that the *sūrah* moves, between its opening and closing sections, from (a) biblical prefigurations in Genesis, Exodus, and the stories of the patriarchs; to (b) the rituals of the qurʾānic community; to (c) the laws of the qurʾānic community; and to (d) war-making. These sections correspond to (a) the history of the Covenant, (b) the demarcation of the new covenantal-biblical community, (c) the legal content

Sinai in verse 51 and the verb *ʿahidnā*, also with God as subject, in regard to Abraham and Ishmael in verse 125.

54. According to Mir, Iṣlāḥī views Sūrahs 1–5 as constituting a coherent grouping, the main shared theme (*ʿamūd*) of which is "Law," especially the pentateuchal law possessed by earlier biblical communities. Mir, *Coherence*, 87–88.

55. My schematic outline of others' accounts of the form of this *sūrah* cannot hope to do justice to these authors' thoughtful analyses. This table is offered heuristically, to facilitate comparison at a very general level and illustrate different interpretive approaches. The works in question, in addition to Mahmood, Reda, Robinson, and Zahniser (all cited above), are Raymond K. Farrin, "Surat al-Baqara: A Structural Analysis," *MW* 100 (2010): 17–32 and David E. Smith, "The Structure of *al-Baqarah*," *MW* 91 (2001): 121–136.

of the new Covenant (the Neo-Covenantal Code), and (d) the defense of the new covenantal community.

There are a few points where I differ from previous studies of Sūrat al-Baqarah. For purposes of the present analysis, I consider that a section retelling biblical narratives commences at verse 30 with the story of God's sending Adam to be God's representative on earth. That this is done over the angels' objection, in connection with God's apprising Adam of the names and his installation of Adam and Eve in Paradise, arguably represents the inception of the Covenant in the *sūrah*'s larger narrative trajectory. It is noteworthy that, when they object to God's favoring of Adam, the angels correctly and with lexical precision predict humans' violation of the covenantal-decalogic commandment against murder (v. 30, *man… yasfiku'l-dimā'*; v. 84, *lā tasfikūna dimā'akum*; v. 85, *thumma antum… taqtulūna anfusakum*). The preservation of the biblical sequence of Genesis and Exodus here, beginning with an account of God's relationship with the first humans and then continuing by describing God's relationship with Moses and the Jews, also suggests that the biblical materials from verse 30 to 39 can be grouped together with those that immediately follow.[56]

I (along with Farrin) consider the border between verses 141 and 142 to mark a major caesura in the *sūrah*. That is where, in my view, the focus

56. As can be seen in Table 3, the various modern studies of this *sūrah*'s form all deem the first thirty-nine verses to constitute the *sūrah*'s opening section. That is presumably because none of them considers that the Adam and Moses narratives are rhetorically or thematically connected as 'Bible' stories about the Covenant, and probably also because the framing of the stories as an address to the Jews is only signaled at verse 40, not earlier. The recounting of biblical material begins with the qur'ānic narrative marker *idh* in verse 30. The address to the Jews is marked in verse 40 with the phrase *yā banī isrā'īl*, but since the narrative strategy (using *idh* as a marker) for the biblical material that follows verse 40 is exactly the same as that for verses 30–39, there is formal-rhetorical support for viewing the entire section, from verses 30 to 141, as a larger formal unit. It may be interesting from a narratological viewpoint to consider the effect of postponing the marking of the frame (the second-person plural address to the Jews) until verse 40. The framing verse inception *yā banī isrā'īl* in verse 40 could be understood as a technique for complicating what we might call the audience frame *within* a major section rather than denoting a major thematic boundary *between* sections. This same phrase occurs also in verse 47, and introduces a new subsection, as here, in verse 122. The more frequent verse inception *yā ayyuhā'lladhīna āmanū* also has only occasional structural significance (see n. 34 above). In regard to theme, as Böwering notes, the Qur'ān expressly connects the inception of the Covenant with Adam: "Covenant," 465 (citing Q Ṭāhā 20:115). Joseph Lumbard identifies Adam's receipt of "words" (*kalimāt*) from God in verses 37–38 of Sūrat al-Baqarah as the first renewal of the Covenant after the Fall: "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an," *JQS* 17 (2015): 1–23, 11.

Table 3: Seven interpretations of the structure of Sūrat al-Baqarah.

Verse	Lowry	Robinson	Reda	Zafer	Farrin	Smith	Zahniser
1	Opening: scripture, believers, unbelievers, parables, hymn	Prologue	1. Humankind	1. Exordium	A Faith vs. unbelief	Establishment of the authoriy of the Qur'ān and Muḥammad	Prologue
20							
21					B God's creation and knowledge		
29							
30	Bible stories retold to the Jews: Adam, Moses						
39							
40		Criticism of the Children of Israel	2. The Children of Israel	2. Address to the Jews	C Moses delivers the law	Failure of the Children of Israel	Islam is for the People of the Book (a) Children of Israel
75							
75	Interlude: reprise of preceding themes, biblical references				D Abraham tested; he and Ishmael build God's house; Muslim responses to People of the Book	Reaffirmation of the authority of the Qur'ān and Muḥammad	
103							
104							
118							
119							
121							
122	Resumption of the Bible stories retold to the Jews: Abraham, Ishmael, Patriarchs	The Abrahamic legacy	3. The Emerging Muslim Nation 3.1 Abrahamic origins	3. Abrahamic exempla			(b) Unite
123							
124							
141							
142	Ritual and communal				E Kaʿbah as the new *qiblah*		
151							
152							

153	polemic: -*qiblah* -pilgrimage -dietary rules -*qiblah* reprised	Legislation for the new nation	3.2 Legislation for the new nation		D′ Testing of Muslims: Kaʿbah, pilgrimage		Hinge
162							
163				4. Legislation			Law and liberation
167							
168						Basic Islamic legislation	
177							
178	Legislation 1 (Neo-Covenantal Code pt. 1)				C′ Prophet delivers the law		
203							
204	Interlude						
214							
215	Legislation 2 (Neo-Covenantal Code pt. 2)						
242							
243	War propaganda: legitimate warfare, underdogs, Bible stories, God's power to resurrect, hymn	The struggle to liberate the Kaʿbah	3.3 Testing of faith	5. Kaʿbah as axis of community	B′ God's creation and knowledge		
246							
247							
253							
254							
257							
258							
260							
261	Legislation 3 (contributions, usury, debts)						
283							
284	Closing: hymn, doxology, prayer	The epilogue		6. Conclusion	A′ Faith vs. unbelief	Reaffirmation of M.'s authority; concluding prayer	Epilogue
285							
286							

shifts from the biblical past to the qur'ānic present.[57] However, if one wanted to construe verses 122 to 177 as a single section that portrayed the biblical grounding of the qur'ānic community's ritual life, that section would provide a pivotal center for a five-part chiastic structure. In general, previous scholarship has not considered the Neo-Covenantal Code, in verses 178–242, to be structurally or thematically significant, even though it is highly distinctive and concentrated in its rhetoric and content and thus calls attention to itself as a key component of the *sūrah*. Finally, most of the other accounts of the structure of Sūrat al-Baqarah have difficulty making thematic sense of the technical commercial legislation that appears in verses 277–283 dealing with usury and extensions of credit, though Smith and Zahniser do subsume it under larger legislative sections—which in turn creates difficulties in accounting for the war propaganda in verses 243–260.[58]

Narrative Arc and Composition

The reading of Sūrat al-Baqarah offered in this study also has implications for the composition of the text. The rousing and militant call to arms (vv. 243–261) that comes after the second of the two main legislative passages continues to use biblical narratives as prefigurations of the qur'ānic audience, as did the passages on creation, Moses, and the patriarchs in verses 30–141. The rhetorical momentum here, near the *sūrah*'s end, is high and possibly sustained by the exhortations to contribute materially to the cause beginning at verse 261. But beginning with the discussion of usury—which includes two

57. This is not say that there are no references to the qur'ānic present before that point in the *sūrah*, but that the qur'ānic audience becomes the primary focus of most of the sections of the *sūrah* after verse 142.

58. I should note here also, first, Klar's summary of Bazargan's understanding of the *sūrah*'s structure as being divided into three (possibly originally separate) blocks: vv. 1–163, vv. 165–242 (with verse 164 being a later addition), and vv. 243–286. The general criterion for this structural schema is verse length. Then, second, Klar herself, building on Bazargan's insights, proposes that the *sūrah* grew "incrementally within three discrete compositional rings" beginning with verse 40 (address to the Children of Israel), verse 168 (address to mankind), and verse 243 (an appeal to the community to fight). See "Text-Critical Approaches; Part Two," 85. For Klar, any interpretation of the *sūrah* not rooted in a theory of compositional processes will succumb to subjective identification of linguistic and thematic elements. I am not certain that this study has lived up to such a high standard in regard to the positing of specific compositional processes leading to the outcome that is Sūrat al-Baqarah. The existence and relative formal congruity of the two substantial passages that I have labeled the "Neo-Covenantal Code," however, is an objective textual fact of the *sūrah*, and it is the phenomenon around which the present discussion has been structured.

significant exceptions, pre-qur'ānic transactions (v. 275) and the permissibility of renegotiating the payment schedule if usurious interest is forgiven (vv. 278, 280)—the *sūrah*'s momentum begins to flag. Even though usury is the moral inverse of communal contributions, and God makes war against it (v. 279), the articulation of exceptions and then the cumbersome exposition of rules governing written contracts of indebtedness slows the pace of the *sūrah* and seems to interrupt its progress towards the final three verses, in which the ideas of divine omniscience, legal capacity, and victory over the community's enemies are succinctly and powerfully recapitulated, partly in the form of a prayer.

On grounds of rhetorical and thematic momentum, then, I would suggest that the legal materials at the *sūrah*'s end, in verses 275–283, may belong to a later stage in the *sūrah*'s composition. Verse 282, easily the longest verse in the whole *sūrah*,[59] offers a lengthy, detailed, and slightly arid exposition of legal doctrine, the exposition of which contrasts with the more compact and rhetorically highly marked sets of legislative verses that appear in verses 178–203 and 215–242. If it is an addition or interpolation, it will have been attracted to its present location in the *sūrah* by the themes of finance and commercial ethics present in the discussions of contributions to the cause and usury that precede it—though the technical details of the usury discussion themselves arguably slow the *sūrah*'s momentum, too. The presence of the Neo-Covenantal Code in verses 178–242 may also have made this location in the *sūrah* seem plausible as a site where additional positive legislation could be woven in.

Conclusions

What allows Sūrat al-Baqarah's legal passages to be used to index the progression of themes and track the *sūrah*'s overall structure is the interplay

59. Verse 282 has the most words of any verse in the *sūrah*; Klar calls it an "extreme outlier in terms of length" ("Text-Critical Approaches; Part Two," 73). It is nearly twice as long as the next longest verse (v. 102, 74 words) and there are only seven verses in total that have more than 60 words, and even these are considerably longer than most of the verses in Sūrat al-Baqarah. From about verse 260, the average verse length becomes longer, even excluding verse 282. Muslim exegetical literature documents instances of interpolation, characterized as Medinan verses in Meccan *sūrah*s and vice versa. It is among the topics discussed in the very first chapter of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's introduction to Qur'ānic Studies, where he reports that, although it is rare for Meccan verses to appear in Medinan *sūrah*s, he is aware that verses 109 and 272 of Sūrat al-Baqarah are reported to be Meccan. See *Al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 2010), 48. The more usual situation—Medinan verses in Meccan *sūrah*s—is the subject of a study by Tilman Nagel, *Medinensische Einschübe in mekkanischen Suren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

between those passages and the *sūrah*'s biblical narratives. Structural analysis through an examination of legislation may also prove fruitful for other *sūrah*s that combine legislation with biblical narrative materials, such as Sūrat al-Mā'idah or a late Meccan *sūrah* like Sūrat al-An'ām. Whether a *sūrah* with significant legislative content but a paucity of narrative elements, such as Sūrat al-Nisā' or Sūrat al-Anfāl, could be analyzed in that way remains to be tested.

In the case of Sūrat al-Baqarah, if one construes it, from a certain altitude, primarily as a retelling of biblical narratives and then the presentation of a set of "biblical" laws to govern the neo-biblical or neo-covenantal qur'ānic community, it resolves into an interpretation of the first two books of the Pentateuch, Genesis and Exodus. At this level of generalization, the fact that the order of the narrative materials from Exodus and Genesis does not always correspond precisely to their biblical order is unimportant; biblical referentiality is more significant than sequence (even though, from a lower altitude, attention to the sequence of these materials might be fruitful).[60] The important sequence is the occurrence first of biblical narratives, which anyway begin in Sūrat al-Baqarah near enough to creation with Adam and continue with Moses, and, second, of "biblical" legislation.

The main point of a condensed re-presentation of Genesis and Exodus would be to draw parallels between the history of the Jews as parties to the Covenant and the qur'ānic audience as the new covenantal community. These parallels unfold on various levels (figuration, re-enactment, succession, new covenant, etc.). Though this interpretation of Sūrat al-Baqarah is not new, it does help to shed light on the function and distinctiveness of the *sūrah*'s various legal passages, which has been the goal of this article.[61] The most prominent legislative feature of the *sūrah*, its two main lists of obligations, which appear in verses 178–203 and 215–242, present the Neo-Covenantal Code sent down to govern the ritual and civil life of the qur'ānic community. For the qur'ānic community, that code—the new Covenant—is not a spiritual fulfillment of biblical legislation, but rather an updating and reimposition of biblicizing legislation in an Arabian context.

60. That referentiality is more important than accuracy is shown by the varying versions of the Decalogue, sometimes abbreviated and sometimes augmented, that appear in the Qur'ān. This point seems at least implicit in Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān*, 215–218, and it is one that I made in my article "When Less is More."

61. It is certainly suggested by Neal Robinson in the interpretation of Sūrat al-Baqarah cited above.

JIQSA 2 (2017): 149–168

RING COMPOSITION IN SŪRAT YŪSUF (Q 12)

JAWAD ANWAR QURESHI

Abstract

This paper focuses on the structure of Sūrat Yūsuf (Q 12), arguing that the *sūrah* demonstrates the most prominent features of ring composition more intricately than scholarship has thus far acknowledged. This paper first considers guidelines for arguing for ring composition, following critical scholarship on ring composition and Mary Douglas' *Thinking in Circles*. It then demonstrates that Q 12 displays an intricate structure of mirroring, concentric composition, and parallelism, and draws attention to the literary markers and correspondences between mirrored elements throughout the narrative. The final section goes beyond the form of the *sūrah* to address its broader argument by placing it in the context of the third Meccan phase of the Prophet Muḥammad's mission. The themes of betrayal, treachery, exile, reconciliation, forbearance, and reunion are central to this narrative and reflect the anxiety and despair of Muḥammad in this period. This paper demonstrates the utility of analyzing passages of the Qur'ān for ring composition, while adhering to stricter criteria for this type of analysis.

Keywords

Joseph, ring composition, Mary Douglas

Recent decades have witnessed a growing body of Western scholarship on the thematic coherence and structural unity of qur'ānic *sūrah*s.[1] Michel Cuypers, for example, has demonstrated the value of applying methods of rhetorical criticism derived from Biblical Studies to examine *sūrah*s for symmetry, parallelism, and ring and mirror compositions.[2] More recently, Raymond

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the International Qur'anic Studies Association held in San Antonio, Texas, USA, in November 2016, and was subsequently awarded the 2017 Andrew Rippin Best Paper Prize, open to papers delivered at IQSA Annual Meetings by junior scholars. The prize is given in honor of Prof. Andrew Rippin (1950–2016), a leading scholar of the Qur'ān and inaugural president of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (2014). The present paper is a revised and expanded version of that paper.

2. See Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Miami,

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441/jiqsa.2.2017.a007

Farrin has argued that the Arabic poetic tradition employed concentric symmetry and that such symmetry is evident in the Qur'ān.[3] On the other hand, such studies have been criticized for overlooking objective textual criteria in their efforts to discover ring composition. In a review essay on the works of Cuypers and Farrin, Nicolai Sinai laments how arguments for ring composition are "often counterintuitive and even arbitrary," often based on interpretations of evidence that are "frequently weak or self-servingly selective," and at the same time literary signals that would commonsensically indicate a composition's structure are ignored in the attempt to "discover" rings.[4] Sinai's advice is not to abandon the search for ring composition but to move away from what appear to be highly subjective readings and to insist that claims for intratextual correspondences in a *sūrah* be "compelling, specific, and ideally also exclusive, meaning that they should not also apply to further sections of the sura."[5] He provides two suggestions that should be starting points for such investigations. The first is to remain true to the literary markers within the text (topical shifts, rhyme, use of vocatives, etc.) and to thoroughly lay out their structural significance. After this "thick description" of the passages' literary markers, one would then catalogue the intertextual overlaps within the *sūrah*.[6] Sinai's recommendations thus are intent on not sacrificing the literary features of the text to structure as well as making the argument for a given structure from the text itself.

Building on Sinai's suggestions and concerns about the highly subjective way in which proponents of qur'ānic ring composition have made their case, I suggest that if one wants to make a case for ring compositions, one would do well to adhere to Mary Douglas' description of conventions in ring composition. Most proponents of ring composition cite Douglas' *Thinking in Circles*, but generally do not adhere to her recommendations for discovering ring compositions, other than noting that "the meaning is in the middle."[7] Douglas describes ring composition as "a construction of parallelisms that must open a theme, develop it, and round it off by bringing the conclusion

FL: Convivium, 2009); idem, *The Composition of the Qur'ān: Rhetorical Analysis,* trans. Jerry Ryan (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); and idem, "Structures rhétoriques dans le Coran: Une analyse structurelle de la sourate 'Joseph' et de quelques sourates brèves," *MIDEO* 22 (1995): 107–195.

3. See Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Quranic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2014).

4. See Nicolai Sinai, "Review Essay: Going Round in Circles," *JQS* 19 (2017): 106–122, 108.

5. Ibid., 114.

6. Ibid., 119–120.

7. See Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 10.

back to the beginning,"[8] and abstracts seven conventions that one can expect to see in long ring compositions. These conventions, she warns, are not rules in the sense that ring compositions strictly adhere to them; rather, they are so commonly observed that they function *like* rules of some sort.[9] The first of these conventions is that the composition contains an *exposition* or *prologue*, which sets up the theme, characters, and narrative. It usually tells of a dilemma that has to be faced and ultimately resolved. The second convention is that the narrative is *split into two halves*, the first setting up a narrative tension and the second resolving it. These halves are structured in *parallel sections* in which carefully balanced correspondences are placed, to which the listener can latch on. To mark the beginning and resolution of these parallel sections, *indicators* are used, such as the repetition of certain words, a phrase, or a refrain. One of the most important features of a ring composition is that the *center is loaded*; the center is the most important part of ring composition, as it contains the central theme, moral lesson, or pivotal/climactic moment in a text. Douglas also notes that there can be *rings within rings*, where a large ring might have smaller rings within it. Finally, the two ends of the story must have *closure*, signaling the completion of the ring.

Many of the scholars that argue for the thematic unity and unified structure of *sūrah*s have been drawn to Q 12. This is naturally so, as Q 12 demonstrates the greatest narrative unity, telling the story of the biblical patriarch Joseph over 111 verses. Mustansir Mir has written two articles on the literary aspects of Q 12, alluding to the story's ring structure.[10] Angelika Neuwirth has provided a detailed colometric analysis of Q 12.[11] Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila presents a "thick description" of the lexicon of the *sūrah* and draws attention to the symmetrical structure of the narrative, but does not make a case for ring composition.[12] Neal Robinson describes the structure of Q 12 as "loosely chiastic" and provides a useful outline of the *sūrah* but does not investigate this

8. Ibid., x.

9. Ibid., 35–38.

10. See Mustansir Mir, "Irony in the Qur'ān: A Study of the Story of Joseph," in Issa J. Boullata (ed.), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 173–187; idem, "The Qur'ānic Study of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters," *MW* 76 (1986): 1–15.

11. See Angelika Neuwirth, "Zur Struktur der *Yūsuf-Sure*," in Werner Diem and Stefan Wild (eds.), *Studien aus Arabistik und Semitistik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1980), 125–152.

12. See Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "'We Will Tell You the Best of Stories," *StOr* 67 (1991): 7–32.

further.[13] Only Cuypers has dedicated an article to the ring structure of Q 12, presenting a ring structure that resembles Robinson's chiastic structure.[14]

This article builds on the rich literature on Q 12 and couples Sinai's recommendations about literary markers with Douglas' description of the conventions of ring composition to argue that Sūrat Yūsuf (Q 12) bears all of the markings of ring composition. In cataloguing the literary markers in Q 12 and their correspondences, and considering them in light of Douglas' conventions, I argue that this *sūrah* has an overarching concentric ring composition (ABC/x/C′B′A′), and that sections within this arrangement reflect parallelism (ABC/A′B′C′) as well as mirroring (ABC/C′B′A′). In the process, I attempt to demonstrate the practicability of applying stricter literary-structural criteria to determine ring composition throughout the Qur'ān.

Having laid out the structure of Q 12, I then present its overall argument by situating it in the third Meccan phase before the *hijrah*, reflecting the futility of the Prophet Muḥammad's preaching and his growing despair of the impending punishment. Joseph's relationship with his brothers serves as a model for Muḥammad and his followers in their relationship with the Meccans, and the *sūrah* contains an implicit promise of victory for Muḥammad and his nascent community.

Ring Structure of Q 12

Q 12 is arranged concentrically following a pattern of ABC/D/C′B′A′. This can be broadly outlined as follows:

A. 1–3. Preface
  B. 4–6. Joseph's dream
    C. 7–18. Jacob's family drama; Joseph separated from Jacob
      D. 19–57. Joseph in Egypt
    C′. 58–98. Jacob's family drama; Joseph reunited with Jacob
  B′. 99–101. Fulfillment of Joseph's dream
A′. 102–111. Conclusion

[A] We have the opening three verses, which include the *ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'ah* (disconnected letters), the letters *alif lām rā*, followed by an address to Muḥammad telling him that he is taught "the best of stories" (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*) of which he had no previous knowledge. [B] Verses 4–6 present the first act

13. See Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (2nd ed.; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003): 148–149, 157–158.

14. Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques."

of the narrative, with Joseph recounting his dream to his father Jacob: Joseph saw eleven stars, the sun, and the moon all bowing down to him. From there, the major movements of the narrative can be schematized as follows: [C] in verses 7–18 we are introduced to the family drama with Joseph's brothers' plot to kill him, though they agree instead to cast him into a well, fake his death, and deceive their father. [D] This is followed by the center ring, verses 19–57, the longest part of the narrative, telling Joseph's story in Egypt. [C′] The next scene, verses 58–98, brings us back to the family drama between Joseph and his brothers; this time, however, he deceives them and devises a scheme to be reunited with his brother Benjamin and father Jacob.[15] [B′] The last scene of the narrative, verses 99–102, provides closure to the story, ending as it began, with Joseph's dream now fulfilled as his father, mother, and eleven brothers bow down to him. [A′] The *sūrah* then concludes with an address to Muḥammad that affirms his revelation and restates the warning against those who would deny his preaching. This is the general ring structure of Q 12, which begins and ends with an address to Muḥammad that frames the family drama between Jacob and his children, Joseph and his brothers, with the center of the dramatic narrative being Joseph's activities in Egypt.

As Douglas noted, one of the key features of ring composition is that the focus of the composition is on the middle. When we look at the middle of Q 12 as just outlined, [D] Joseph in Egypt, we find that this part of the narrative too is organized concentrically. This section can be outlined as follows:

D.1. 19–21. Joseph is a slave in Egypt
  D.2. 22–35. Joseph is tempted and imprisoned
    D.3. 36–49. Joseph interprets dreams
  D.2′. 50–51. Joseph is exonerated and freed
D.1′. 54–57. Joseph is made overseer of the storehouses

Broadly speaking, Joseph's story in Egypt has three main acts. [D.1] After being cast into a well by his brothers, Joseph is found by a passing caravan which takes him to Egypt and sells him as a slave. [D.2] There Joseph is bought by an Egyptian—the biblical Potiphar, and the qurʾānic al-ʿAzīz. The latter's wife, Zulaykhā, attempts to seduce Joseph, but he resists her come-ons. Joseph is cast into prison, and it is here that we reach the center of this ring, [D.3] as Joseph interprets the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners and the

15. For the sake of readability, I will use the proper nouns from extra-qurʾānic sources for characters in the narrative who are not named in the *sūrah*. Thus, I will use "Potiphar" instead of al-ʿAzīz, "Zulaykhā" instead of *imraʾat al-ʿAzīz*, and "Benjamin" for Joseph's brother.

king. After this, [D.2′] he is exonerated of any wrongdoing and set free. As a reward for his knowledge and honesty, [D.1′] he is made the overseer of the storehouses.

When we look at the series of events in this section closer, we find that the parallels are in fact more detailed than what we noticed at first glance. [D.1–D.7] The concentric structure appears much stronger, with the center of this ring being the king's dream.

D.1. 19–21. Joseph is a slave in Egypt
D.2. 23–24. Joseph resists Zulaykhā out of loyalty to Potiphar
D.3. 24–29. Zulaykhā assaults him
D.4. 30–32. Zulaykhā displays Joseph, women cut hands
D.5. 33–35. Joseph is imprisoned
D.6. 36-41. Joseph interprets dreams of prisoners
D.7. 42. Freed prisoner forgets Joseph
D.8. 43–44. King has a dream

From the beginning of the *sūrah* until this point, Joseph is afflicted with one trial after another. His brothers conspire to kill him, he is cast into a well, and he is taken to Egypt, separated from his beloved father and brother. [D.1] In Egypt, he is sold as a slave and [D.2] resists Zulaykhā's attempts to seduce him out of loyalty to Potiphar. [D.3] Zulaykhā then sexually assaults Joseph and the two are caught in a compromising position by Potiphar. Zulaykhā's peers are scandalized by her behavior, and [D.4] she puts Joseph on display to these women. They become so enraptured by his beauty that while cutting fruit they unknowingly cut their own hands. [D.5] Joseph is then imprisoned, and [D.6] is asked to interpret the dreams of two of his fellow inmates. As one of them is set free, Joseph implores him to mention him to his master, but [D.7] the prisoner is made to forget by Satan.

At this point, Joseph's fate begins to change and we find each of his misfortunes undone one by one. [D.8] The king mentions to his court a dream that he had the previous night that he would like interpreted, and [D.7′] Joseph's former cellmate suddenly remembers him and seeks him out to interpret the king's dream. [D.6′] After interpreting the dream to the king's satisfaction, [D.5′] the king asks that Joseph be brought to him. [D.4′] However Joseph sends the messenger back to the king, asking him to inquire about "the women who cut their hands," who now declare him innocent of any wrongdoing. [D.3′] This is immediately followed by Zulaykhā confessing that she tried to seduce him, thereby [D.2′] exonerating Joseph before Potiphar. [D.1′] The king, witnessing testimony of Joseph's trustworthiness and seemingly impressed with Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, makes Joseph the overseer of the storehouses.

As the above schema illustrates, each of Joseph's misfortunes is systematically undone in the exact reverse order in which they occurred, with the turning point in the narrative being the king's dream.

D.7′. 45. Freed prisoner remembers Joseph
D.6′. 46–49. Joseph interprets dream of king
D.5′. 50. Joseph is freed
D.4′. 51. Women declare Joseph innocent
D.3′. 51. Zulaykhā declares Joseph innocent
D.2′. 52–53. Joseph is exonerated before Potiphar
D.1′. 54–57. Joseph is made keeper of the storehouses

The entire *sūrah* can be outlined concentrically as follows, in twenty-one scenes:

A. 1–3. Preface
B. 4–6. Joseph's dream
C. 7–18. Joseph and his brothers: separated from Jacob
D.1. 19–22. Joseph is a slave in Egypt
D.2 23, 24. Joseph resists Zulaykhā out of loyalty to Potiphar
D.3. 24–29. Joseph is assaulted by Zulaykhā
D.4. 30–32. Zulaykhā displays Joseph, women cut hands
D.5. 33–35. Joseph is imprisoned
D.6. 36–41. Joseph interprets dreams of prisoners
D.7. 42. Freed prisoner forgets Joseph
D.8. 43, 44. King has a dream
D.7′. 45. Freed prisoner remembers Joseph
D.6′. 46–49. Joseph interprets dream of king
D.5′. 50. Joseph is freed
D.4′. 51. Women declare him innocent
D.3′. 51. Zulaykhā declares him innocent
D.2′. 52–53. Joseph is exonerated before Potiphar
D.1′. 54–57. Joseph is made keeper of the storehouses
C′. 58–98. Joseph and his brothers: reunited with Jacob
B′. 99–101. Fulfillment of Joseph's dream
A′. 102–111. Conclusion

Another way to illustrate the mirroring and concentric structure of the *sūrah* is in the following table (see Figure 1). Starting from the top and then reading down the left column, we have the first half of the *sūrah*'s narrative [A–D.7]. Then, starting from the bottom and reading the right column upwards, we continue the narrative and see the correspondences with the

first half of the *sūrah* mirrored exactly [D.7′–A′]. The middle column broadly notes the tensions from the first half of the *sūrah* and their resolution in the second half.

A. 1–3. Preface / A′. 102–111. Conclusion		
B. 4–6. Joseph's dream	DREAM / DREAM REALIZED	B′. 99–101. Joseph's dream realized
C. 7–18. Joseph separated from Jacob	SEPARATION / REUNION	C′. 58–98. Joseph reunited with Jacob
D.1. 19–22. Joseph sold as a slave	STATUS IN EGYPT LOW / HIGH	D.1′. 54–57. Joseph made keeper of the storehouses
D.2. 23, 24. Joseph resists Zulaykhā out of loyalty to Potiphar	TEMPTATION/ EXONERATION	D.2′. 52, 53. Joseph's loyalty is confirmed
D.3. 24–29. Joseph tempted by Zulaykhā	TEMPTATION / EXONERATION	D.3′. 51. Zulaykhā declares him innocent
D.4. 30–32. Zulaykhā displays Joseph, women cut their hands	TEMPTATION / EXONERATION	D.4′. 51. Women declare him innocent
D.5. 33–35. Joseph put in prison	IMPRISONMENT / FREEDOM	D.5′. 50. Joseph taken out of prison
D.6. 36–41. Joseph interprets dreams of prisoners.	INTERPRETS DREAMS PRISONERS / KING	D.6′. 46–49. Joseph interprets the king's dream.
D.7. 42. Freed prisoner forgets Joseph	FORGETTING / REMEMBERING	D.7′. 45. The freed prisoner remembers Joseph
D.8. 43–44. The king's dream		

Figure 1. The ring structure of Q 12.

What the above presentation of the concentric structure of Q 12 does not take into account is the monotheistic sermon that Joseph delivers while in prison (vv. 35–42). Some scholars have been drawn to this aspect of the narrative, seeing it as the climax of Joseph's story. Neuwirth, for example, describes it as "the crowning keystone in the narrative arch … situated at the center of the central complex of scenes."[16] I have marked the king's dream, instead of this sermon, as the center of the ring because the mirroring of

16. Quoted by Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 75. See Neuwirth, "Zur Struktur der *Yūsuf-Sure*," 14.

the narrative would not be maintained were the sermon made the center. The sermon occurs at what I have marked as [D.5] while Joseph is in prison, verses 38–40. Were this taken to be the center, it would not account for the parallelism of his former cellmate's forgetting then remembering, nor the symmetry between his interpretation of first the prisoners' dreams and then the king's. The sermon, however, does not lose any of its importance by not being the center of the ring; rather, it is significant because of its proximity to the center and Joseph's disclosing his ability to interpret dreams.

Cuypers sees the *sūrah* not as being concentrically arranged as I have it, but as having a mirror structure ABCDEF/F′E′D′C′B′A′.[17] He treats Joseph's imprisonment, preaching, and interpretation of the prisoners' dreams all together in [F] as mirroring Joseph's being in prison and interpreting the king's dream in [F′]. This does not account for a number of points that are clearly mirrored, what I have marked as [D.4–D.4′], throwing off the order of events. It is only when the king's dream is treated as the center, as the pivot of the story marking a change in Joseph's fortune, that we can account for the mirroring of each scene.

A closer look at the verses of Joseph's imprisonment demonstrates "a ring-within-a-ring." Verses 35 to 42 form a concentric ring the center of which is the monotheistic sermon that Joseph delivers to his cellmates.

35. Potiphar decides to imprison Joseph "for a time"
    36. The prisoners recount their dreams
        37–40. Joseph delivers a monotheistic sermon
    41. Joseph interprets their dreams
42. Joseph remains in prison "for some years"

We can thus see some of the key conventions of ring composition in this *sūrah* that Douglas described: the narrative in two halves, with parallel sections, and the pivot of the story in the center. In the first half of the narrative, Joseph is subjected to a variety of trials and tribulations, while in the second, he is freed of each burden in the opposite sequence of its occurrence and rewarded. We can also note a ring-within-a-ring that has as its center Joseph revealing his monotheistic faith and preaching to his fellow prisoners.

Parallelism in Jacob's Family Drama

Section [C], detailing Jacob's family drama, deserves a closer look, as it is in fact longer than the central part of the story, Joseph in Egypt [D]. Rather

17. Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques," 135.

than displaying the concentric structure that has been outlined thus far, the events in sections [C] and [C′] display, with one exception, parallelism (ABCD/A′B′C′D′). In these two sections are six plot points: (1) a plot is devised; (2) the brothers plead with Jacob to let one of their siblings go off with them despite Jacob's protests; (3) the brothers lose that sibling, resulting in Jacob being separated from them; (4) the brothers return to Jacob, crying, with an explanation; (5) evidence is brought in the form of Joseph's shirt; and (6) Jacob doubts the words of his children and resigns himself to be patient.

In its eleven verses (vv. 8–18), section [C] contains these six plot points in the following order: [C.1] The brothers display their jealousy of both Joseph and Benjamin, and set into motion their plot to eliminate Joseph. The mention of Joseph "and his brother" is key here, as the latter will be the object of plotting in the paralleling section at the end of the *sūrah* (vv. 8–10). [C.2] The brothers then try to convince their father Jacob of their good intentions toward Joseph, and Jacob relents (vv. 11–14). [C.3] The brothers then cast Joseph into the well and he is separated from them and his father (v. 15). The narrator informs the listener that Joseph was inspired at that moment, that he would inform his brothers of their action of theirs while they were unaware of him. [C.4] The brothers return to Jacob, crying, claiming that a wolf ate Joseph (vv. 16–17). [C.5] They produce his shirt with blood on it as evidence to the 'truth' of their claim (v. 18), [C.6] which Jacob rejects, castigating them and sufficing himself with being forbearing in this trial—"He said, 'Nay! Rather your souls have prompted you to do wrong! But it is best to be patient'" (v. 18).

In section [C′], we find that parallels of these six events occur in the same order as above, with one exception. This time, the sibling that the brothers are concerned with is Benjamin and not Joseph, and here it is Joseph that plots against his brothers. His scheme is ultimately to be reunited with Benjamin and Jacob. [C′.1] The brothers, without Benjamin, are in Egypt with their goods (*biḍāʿah*), and Joseph, now the keeper of the storehouses, recognizes them. He asks them to return with one of their brothers so that he too might get a share of the goods that Joseph is distributing, warning the brothers that they would get nothing if they did not return with him. To further entice them, Joseph has his servants restore their goods to them, making them think that they might actually receive more. This is the beginning of Joseph's plot against the brothers (vv. 58–62). [C′.2] The brothers return to Jacob and ask to take Benjamin away to Egypt with them. To Jacob, this is already too similar to their request from before regarding Joseph. Finding their goods in their bags, they start to think that they can return to Egypt and receive a greater portion. The brothers have fallen for Joseph's plot. Jacob relents to his sons' request but demands that they take an oath to return, and he orders them to enter from different gates (vv. 63–68). [C′.3] Seeing Benjamin, Joseph

Plot elements	C. 7–18.	C′. 58–98.
Scheme	7–10. The brothers plot against Joseph	58–62. Joseph plots against the brothers
Plead with Jacob	11–14. Brothers plead to take Joseph	63–68. Brothers plead to take Benjamin
Loss of a brother	15. Brothers lose Joseph	69–79. Brothers lose Benjamin
Return to Jacob	16–17. Brothers return to Jacob crying deceitfully	80–82. Brothers return to Jacob crying truthfully
Joseph's shirt	18. Brothers bring Joseph's shirt with false blood	87–98.* Brothers bring Jacob's true shirt
Jacob's resignation	18. Jacob resigns himself to be patient	83–86.* Jacob resigns himself to be patient

Figure 2. Parallelism in Q 12.

reveals his true identity to his brother and puts into play another ploy to keep Benjamin with him and also bring Jacob to Egypt. Joseph has the king's chalice (*siqāyah*) placed in Benjamin's bag, and as the brothers are departing, he accuses them of theft, where the penalty of theft will be meted out to the one in whose bag the chalice is found. The brothers try to convince Joseph to take another in place of Benjamin but fail (vv. 69–79). [C′.4] The brothers come together to confer, and the eldest of them reminds them of the oath they gave Jacob. He decides that he will not return unless Jacob permits it or God decides for him, and offers an explanation of their innocence in losing Benjamin. Here, the verses begin with the eldest brother's words to his siblings but the scene shifts seemingly in mid-delivery to the conversation with Jacob (vv. 80–82). [C′.5] At this point in the narrative, for the story to be completely parallel, the brothers would have to produce Joseph's shirt as evidence. Given the story thus far, that is not possible. Rather, Jacob, having heard this claim from his sons before, resigns to be patient, repeating the exact words from [C.6], "He said, 'Nay! Rather your souls have prompted you to do wrong! But it is best to be patient'" (Q 12:18, 83) (vv. 83–86). [C′.6] Jacob asks his sons to ascertain the fate of Joseph and his brother.[18] When the brothers return to Joseph, he reveals himself to them as well, forgives them for their earlier actions, and sends them back to their father. Joseph asks them to cast his shirt on their father's face to cure his blindness, and to bring the entire family to him in Egypt. Meanwhile, Jacob has premonitions of Joseph's

18. There is a slippage that happens here, as Jacob, according to the story, should not know that Joseph was the keeper of the storehouses in Egypt. Despite this, he says, "My sons, go find out about Joseph and his brother" (Q 12:87).

return, and Jacob's vision is returned when Joseph's shirt is placed on his face. The brothers are reconciled with their father who forgives them for their wrongdoing (vv. 87–98).

As is clear, with the exception of the order of Joseph's shirt being brought forth as evidence and Jacob's resignation, the two sections are almost entirely parallel to each other. The parallels between these events are outlined in the preceding table (Figure 2). It should be remembered that the parallels are not exact, as two acts (Joseph's shirt returning and Jacob's resignation) in [C′] do not occur in the same order as in [C]. There is thus a partial symmetry between these two sections.

Correspondences within the *Sūrah*

Douglas notes that ring compositions mark the beginning and end of a ring by the repetition of a particular phrase, the recurrence of certain wording, or the fulfillment or resolution of a tension. These features are present too in Q 12.

Starting with the central ring [D], what I have called "Joseph in Egypt," we in fact have the repetition of a phrase word for word, marking the beginning and end of the ring. Verse 21, which initiates the ring and speaks of Joseph being taken to Egypt and sold as a slave, reads, "In this way We settled Joseph in the land" (*wa-kadhālika makkannā li-yūsufa fī'l-arḍ)*. The end of the Egyptian part of Joseph's narrative—after he was freed and given charge of the storehouses—concludes in the same way. Verse 56 reads: "In this way We settled Joseph in the land" (*wa-kadhālika makkannā li-yūsufa fī'l-arḍ)*. The central ring in the *sūrah*, the Egypt sequence, is thus bookended with the exact same words, marking the beginning and end of this ring.

There is a parallelism too in the verses immediately following these, verses 22 and 57 respectively, in reference to God's reward. The first, verse 22, emphasizes the reward for those that do good, whereas verse 57 emphasizes the reward of the hereafter for those who believe and have *taqwā*. The word translated as "reward" is not the same, however, the first being *jazā'* and the second *ajr*. They nonetheless convey the same sense of recompense and reward.

Within this central ring too there is another repetition of a phrase spoken by the same characters but in different circumstances, reflecting the changing fate of Joseph in the two halves of the story. In verse 31, Zulaykhā parades Joseph in front of the women of the city to absolve herself in their eyes. She serves them fruit and hands them knives with which to cut it. As Joseph enters upon them, they are so struck with his beauty that they inadvertently cut their own hands. They proclaim, "God forbid!" (*ḥāsha li'llāh*) and absolve Zulaykhā

of any blame. Likewise, when Joseph is freed from the prison and the king enquires about him with the women, they declare again, "God forbid!" (*ḥāsha li'llāh*) (v. 51), this time absolving Joseph of any blame.

The ring featuring the account of Joseph's trials [C] also has markers indicating the beginning and the end of the ring, not in the repetition of phrases, but in opening and closing the plot. The bookends for this ring are found in verses 15 and 89—in verse 15, Joseph is at the bottom of the well that his brothers threw him in when the divine narrator states: "We inspired him, saying, 'You will tell them of all this [at a time] when they do not realize [who you are]!'" This promise is fulfilled in verses 89–90 when Joseph, now the keeper of the grain in Egypt, says to his brothers, "Do you now realize what you did to Joseph and his brother when you were ignorant?" A phrase is not repeated in this section, but we see a clear fulfillment of an element of the plot.

We find the repetition of an exact phrase here as well. Jacob, after being deceived by his children regarding Joseph's death, rebukes them and rejects their false explanation: "He said, 'Nay! Rather your souls have prompted you to do wrong! But it is best to be patient'" (*qāla bal sawwalatkum anfusukum amran fa-ṣabrun jamīl*) (v. 18). Later in the story, when his same children return from Egypt without another of his sons, this time without Benjamin, Jacob repeats the exact same phrase: "Nay! Rather your souls have prompted you to do wrong! But it is best to be patient" (v. 83).

Throughout the *sūrah*, we find mention of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. Jacob informs him of this in the very beginning, "This is about how your Lord will choose you and teach you to interpret dreams (*yu'allimuka min ta'wīli'l-aḥādith*)" (v. 6). At the first low point of Joseph's life, after he was cast in a well and picked up by a passing caravan to be sold into slavery in a foreign land, verse 21 states "that we might teach him the interpretation of dreams (*li-nu'allimahu min ta'wīli'l-aḥādith*)." At a second low point of Joseph's life, wrongly imprisoned after being sexually assaulted, we find the fulfillment of Jacob's words as Joseph displays this divinely granted ability (v. 41). In the final scene of Joseph's narrative, as he reflects on God's blessings to him, he supplicates God (v. 101), saying, "Lord! You have given me authority; You have taught me (*'allamtanī*) something about the interpretation of dreams (*min ta'wīli'l-aḥādith*)." In these three instances (vv. 6, 21, 101), the phrase *min ta'wīli'l-aḥādith* is associated with the verb *'allama* and God teaching Joseph. Verses 6 and 101 correspond to each other as occurring at the beginning and end of Joseph's narrative, bookmarking ring [B]. Verses 21 and 41 correspond to each other as reflecting the two low points of Joseph's life, slavery and prison. In the former he is promised this knowledge, and in the latter he manifests it and his fortune changes.

Joseph's shirt plays an important role in key moments of his life. In ring [C], Joseph's shirt is first brought to Jacob with "lying blood" (v. 18) on it as the brothers offer explanations for their missing brother. This act is mirrored exactly in verse 93, where Joseph orders his brothers to place his true shirt on Jacob's face. In both instances, his shirt serves as evidence of sorts for the claims being made, in the first instance a false claim, while in the second a true one. In ring [D] his shirt serves as evidence as well, when Potiphar catches Joseph and Zulaykhā in a compromising position (vv. 25–28). Torn as it was from behind, it proved to Potiphar the truth of Joseph's claim and exposed Zulaykhā's treachery.

In the preface and concluding sections, we find another set of parallels repeated in the address to Muḥammad. Emphasis is given to the fact that Muḥammad did not have knowledge of these stories from before, expressed in the beginning as, "Before this you were one of those who knew nothing about them" (v. 3), and the conclusion as, "This account is part of what was beyond your knowledge" (v. 102).

We thus see key features of ring composition—namely, marking the beginning and end of a ring through the repetition of a phrase or certain wording; the foreshadowing of an idea; or the recurrence of particular material objects—in at least the aforementioned instances in Q 12. In three cases, we find exact phrases repeated marking the beginning and ending of the central ring [D] (vv. 21, 56); in [D] as well, the repetition of a phrase (vv. 31, 51) reflecting Joseph's new status; and in the ring around it, [C], we have Jacob repeat an exact phrase to his sons (vv. 15, 85). The case of Joseph and dream interpretation (vv. 6, 101) is also clearly mirrored in the beginning and end of ring [B], as is the role of his shirt in ring [C]. These repetitions are literary signals that flag key moments in the narrative for the listener.

Prophetic Rings

Having outlined the ring composition of Q 12 and drawn attention to its concentric and parallel structures, I now turn to some features of these rings in order to consider the larger argument of the *sūrah*. Each of the rings discussed above has as its focus a prophetic persona and some form of prophetic activity. The preface and conclusion [A/A′] stand out from the rest of the narrative sections of this *sūrah* in that they are predominantly in the second person, using the masculine singular pronoun. Given that the person addressed is presumably Muḥammad, I refer to it as the Muḥammad Ring. The second ring [B/B′] introduces two prophetic figures, Joseph and Jacob, but has as its focus a prophetic act in the form of Joseph's dream in the first part and the dream's realization in the conclusion. I refer to this as the Dream Ring. While

the third ring, [C/C′], also relates to Joseph, it is primarily concerned with the personality of Jacob and the drama in his family. The central ring, [D/D′], focuses exclusively on how Joseph was "established in the land" of Egypt and details his experiences there. It connects the various rings of this narrative as it has as its central moment Joseph's divinely gifted ability to interpret dreams.

With this in mind, we can think of the rings in Q 12 as follows:

A. Muḥammad Ring
  B. Dream Ring
    C. Jacob/Family Drama Ring
      D. Joseph Ring
    C′. Jacob/Family Drama Ring
  B′. Dream Ring
A′. Muḥammad Ring

The *sūrah* can also be visualized in the following manner (see Figure 3). This image is hardly to scale, as the bulk of the *sūrah* is actually in the central two rings.

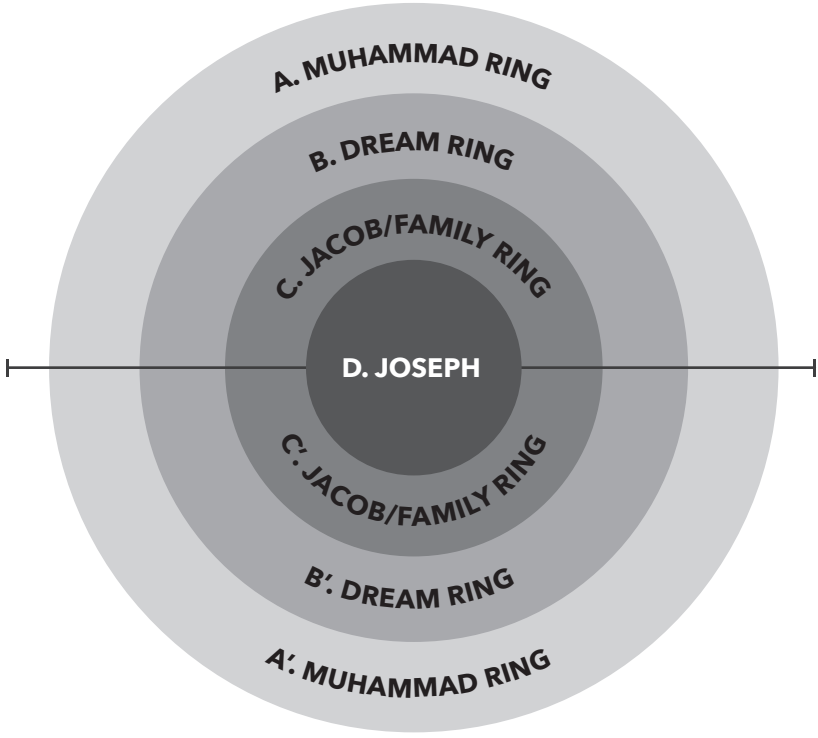

Figure 3. Prophetic rings.

Reading the Rings

What does all this mean? While the plot elements of the *sūrah* can be outlined as above, the argument of the *sūrah* becomes clearer when we keep in mind the context of its promulgation. Scholars generally agree that Q 12 dates from the third Meccan phase. This period reflects an intensification of the Prophet Muḥammad's missionary work and increased opposition to it. Walid Saleh treats Q 12 as part of a group of *sūrah*s that fit together as a "booklet," having an affinity in terms of content and dating from the same time period.[19] These *sūrah*s, Q 10–15, reflect a critical juncture in Muḥammad's mission, and present him as struggling with his failure to win converts, the futility of his preaching and warning, the impending punishment to befall Mecca promised in earlier *sūrah*s, and his growing sense of despair. An outcome of this situation is a rethinking of prophetic history and the search for a new strategy for Muḥammad's mission. Rather than following the warnings established in other *sūrah*s of his preaching, rejection, and punishment, Q 12 stands out as the story of a prophet who, despite a richly detailed series of trials, is ultimately victorious. Not only that, Joseph's story ends with him in a position of authority in a polity.

The pessimistic tone of this grouping of *sūrah*s is reflected in the verses that conclude the Muḥammad Ring. The closing section laments that "however eagerly you may want them to, most men will not believe" (v. 103), and "most of them will only believe in God while also joining others with Him" (v. 106). This negative view of Muḥammad's mission notwithstanding, the *sūrah*, in very qur'ānic fashion, leaves room for the possibility of success: "When the messengers lost all hope and realized that they had been dismissed as liars, Our help came to them: We saved whomever We pleased, but Our punishment will not be turned away from guilty people" (v. 110). It is the sentiment of this verse, with its promise of victory and divine help, that Joseph's story expresses.

The point of the Muḥammad Ring, however, is not to dwell on Muḥammad's despair, but rather to establish his prophetic authority as one who provides knowledge from the Unseen. This is what is repeated in the beginning and conclusion of the ring (vv. 2, 102), e.g.: "This account is part of the Unseen that We reveal to you. You were not present with Joseph's brothers when they made their treacherous plans" (Q 12:102). The knowledge from the Unseen that Muḥammad provides is the details of the narrative of Joseph and his family that takes up the remaining rings over the next hundred or so

19. See Walid Saleh, "End of Hope: Sūras 10–15, Despair and a Way Out of Mecca," in Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (eds.), *Qur'ānic Studies Today* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 105–123, 108.

verses. The activity associated with Joseph throughout the *sūrah*, his ability to interpret dreams, is a species of prophetic activity. In aligning Muḥammad with Joseph, a parallel is made between their relationship to the Unseen. In Joseph's case, this plays out as knowing the meaning of dreams in relation to future events, but in Muḥammad's case (in Q 12 specifically) it is knowledge of the past and the lessons to be drawn therefrom. In this way, the rings pertaining to Muḥammad [A], the dream [B], and Joseph [D] are aligned with respect to the Unseen, whereas ring [C], the family drama between Jacob's descendants, provides the arena wherein the Unseen unfolds.

Plotting and scheming are ubiquitous throughout this *sūrah*. The root *k-y-d* as a "plot" or "treachery" occurs repeatedly in the various rings, associated with various people. Jacob warns Joseph that his brothers will "plot strongly against you" (*yakīdu laka kaydan*) (v. 5). Potiphar rebukes Zulaykhā, saying, "This is another instance of women's treachery (*kaydakunna*): your treachery is truly great" (v. 28). Joseph prays to God to save him from the women's treachery, which God answers (v. 33, 34). We find the root *m-k-r* occur in a similar fashion. Zulaykhā gets word of the gossip or malicious talk (*makrihinna*) of the women of the city (v. 31). The brothers of Joseph are described as making treacherous plans (*yamkirūna*) when they plotted to kill him (v. 102).

All of this plotting, scheming, and treachery is accompanied by temptation and seduction. The root *r-w-d* in its verbal form *rāwada*, with the sense of "to seduce," occurs six times where Zulaykhā or the women of the city are the subject and Joseph the object of the verb (vv. 23, 26, 30, 32, 51 twice, 61). Jacob's sons too use this verb when they describe how they will convince Jacob to send Benjamin with them (v. 61).

Further, Satan plays a key role in manipulating events against Joseph. Jacob, after warning Joseph about the potential plot of his brothers, states, "Indeed, Satan is man's sworn enemy" (v. 5). The suggestion to kill Joseph and to later be righteous (v. 9) (which the brothers tacitly reject) is not attributed to any of the brothers, in contrast to the suggestion in the next verse to cast him out (v. 10). Based on Jacob's warning about Satan's enmity, I suggest that the idea of killing Joseph was Satan's voice or insinuation among the brothers. Joseph explicitly attributes the family drama to Satan: "after Satan sowed discord between me and my brothers" (v. 100). Satan appears again at a crucial moment of Joseph's life in Egypt; as his cellmate was released and Joseph asked him to mention him to his master, "Satan made him forget to do this, and so Joseph remained in prison for a number of years" (v. 42). What is conveyed through all of this is a sense that Joseph is under siege from a variety of forces and circumstances outside of his control.

Jacob announces how he is going to handle his trial (separation from his two beloved sons) through *ṣabr jamīl* (v. 83). Joseph embodies his father's ethic with each trial that he faces. For two-thirds of Joseph's story, he is passive,

the victim of other people's plots and schemes. What keeps him going is his faith in the monotheism of the patriarchs. This is first announced by Jacob (v. 6), then stated dramatically in Joseph's prison sermon. The words are put in Joseph's mouth, but the audience is Muḥammad's.

> This is part of what my Lord has taught me: I reject the faith of those who disbelieve in God and deny the life to come, and I follow the faith of my forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because of God's grace to us and to all humanity, we would never worship anything beside God, but most people are ungrateful. Fellow prisoners, would many diverse gods be better than God the One, the All-Powerful? [No indeed!] All those you worship instead of Him are mere names you and your forefathers have invented, names for which God has sent down no sanction. Authority belongs to God alone, and He orders you to worship none but Him: this is the true faith, though most people do not realize it (Q 12:37–40).

Even after this sermon, when his fortunes start to change, Joseph is passively exonerated, as he does not make a case in his own defense but rather lets events unfold. It is only after he is established in Egypt when his brothers come for their share of his distribution that Joseph exerts some agency and actively deceives his brothers and plots against them. This plotting, however, is not attributed to Joseph, but rather is claimed by the divine voice: "In this way We plotted on behalf of Joseph" (*kadhālika kidnā li-yūsufa*) (v. 76). Joseph, in recounting God's blessings upon him to Jacob, says, "My Lord is most subtle in achieving what He will (*inna rabbī laṭīfun li-mā yashā'u*); He is the All-Knowing, the Truly Wise" (v. 100). It is this divine, subtle plotting on behalf of Joseph that won out against all of Joseph's opponents.

In telling Joseph's story, the Qur'ān provides Muḥammad and his nascent community with an archetype. The themes of family betrayal, plotting and scheming, attempted murder, and exile detailed over rings B, C, and D were surely not unfamiliar to Muḥammad's Meccan followers and reflected their own experiences. The message for Muḥammad's first audience, facing heightened persecution, is clear at this point. In the same way that Joseph received knowledge from God, so too does Muḥammad. As God subtly worked on behalf of Joseph to counter the machinations of those who were envious of Joseph, ripped apart his family, and tried to seduce and morally corrupt him, so too will God act on behalf of Muḥammad and his followers. As Jacob and Joseph showed forbearance in the trials that they faced from their loved ones, so too should Muḥammad and his followers remain forbearing. As Joseph was steadfast in his monotheistic conviction and breaking from the religion of his peers, affirming the religion of the patriarchs, so too should Muḥammad and his followers maintain their monotheistic faith. The themes of patience in exile, as well as the promise of reconciliation, reunion, and

return, can be seen as preparing Muḥammad and his nascent community for their exile from their homeland of Mecca, the establishment of a community in Yathrib, and the promise of return. Q 12 thus presents not only a way out of Mecca, but ultimately, victory.[20]

The authors of the earliest *sīrah* and *maghāzī* texts certainly saw Muḥammad's triumphant conquest of Mecca as related to Joseph's narrative. To give but one example, we find the following account in the *Maghāzī* of Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822). At the conquest of Mecca, Muḥammad cites a verse from Sūrat Yūsuf. The verse in question (Q 12:92) occurs after Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and frees them of any wrongdoing.

> When the Messenger of God came out to the people, and they had gathered around the Kaʿbah, while they were sitting, he said, "Praise belongs to God, whose promise was true, who gave victory to His bondsman, and who vanquished the confederates Himself. What do you say and what do you think?" They [i.e., the Meccans] said, "We say good and think good! A noble brother and the son of a noble brother! And you have power over us!" The Messenger of God said, "I say as my brother Joseph did, 'You will hear no reproaches today. May God forgive you, He is the Most Merciful of the merciful'"[21] (Q 12:92).

Conclusion

This article began with the notion of thematic coherence and structural unity of qur'ānic *sūrah*s and investigated Q 12 with attention to ring composition as a mechanism for such coherence and unity. It has demonstrated that Q 12 has an intricate structure of mirroring, concentrism, and parallelism. The entire *sūrah* also has a series of correspondences between mirrored elements of the narrative. The *sūrah* details Joseph's story framed in an address to Muḥammad. The lesson(s) of the former speaks to Muḥammad's context in the late Meccan phase, as his missionary career was at a crossroads. In detailing the thematic and structural aspects of Q 12, this article has remained close to the literary features of the *sūrah* and sought to infer the *sūrah*'s structure and ring composition from there.

A new horizon for the study of the coherence and unity of *sūrah*s is presented by works that consider the intertextuality between groups of *sūrah*s,

20. For this political reading of Q 12, see M. S. Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph: A Study of Koranic Narrative," *JNES* 44 (1985): 193–204; Saleh, "End of Hope," 114.

21. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Wāqidī, *Kītāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (3 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 2.835.

as in the work of Islam Dayeh on the *ḥawāmīm* (the seven *sūrah*s that begin with the Arabic letters *ḥā'* and *mīm*) (Q 40–46) and Walid Saleh on Q 10–15.[22] Future research into Q 12 and its intertextuality with other *sūrah*s will have to look at later Meccan and early Medinan *sūrah*s, particularly Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ (Q 28) and those that offer parallels with Moses. Joseph is the patriarch that establishes the Israelites in Egypt, but Moses is the lawgiver that frees them from bondage and oppression. Joseph serves as an archetype for Muḥammad in one stage of his prophetic mission, while in the Medinan years, as the head of a polity, and in dialogue with Jewish tribes surrounding Yathrib, Moses is the model.

22. See Islam Dayeh, "Al-Ḥawāmīm: Intertextuality and Coherence in Meccan Surahs," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 461–498; Saleh, "The End of Hope."

JIQSA 2 (2017): 169–199

REVIEW ESSAY: POSITIVISM, REVISIONISM, AND AGNOSTICISM IN THE STUDY OF LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE QUR'ĀN

MICHAEL E. PREGILL

Abstract

This essay examines two recent publications relevant to research into the Qur'ān's revelatory context in late antique Arabia: G. W. Bowersock's *The Crucible of Islam* and *Islam and Its Past*, edited by Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook. The approaches to questions of Islamic origins, the background to the Qur'ān, and the interpretation of the qur'ānic corpus in each of these volumes are strikingly different, and tell us much about the contemporary status quo in Qur'ānic Studies on these questions, or rather the abiding incoherence of the field. Despite significant advances in the field over the last ten years, a cogent, universally accepted framework for understanding the background of the Qur'ān is still lacking, as is a general synthesis of the insights yielded by different methodological approaches. Nevertheless, the approaches of more positivist and more revisionist scholarship are not wholly irreconcilable, and a basic consensus on certain fundamentals (such as the heuristic utility of the basic chronology of revelation), as well as a tacit reconciliation with major aspects of the traditional view, point the way forward for productive research in the future.

Keywords

Late Antiquity, Qur'ānic Studies, methodology, historiography, South Arabia, Muḥammad, revisionism, positivism

This essay is a review of two recent works on the Qur'ān, early Islam, and the late antique environment in which they emerged, as well as an attempt to explore some of the larger methodological issues they provoke. *The Crucible of Islam*, the most recent monograph by the historian G. W. Bowersock, is a concise survey covering the transition from pre-Islamic Late Antiquity to the

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.31441/jiqsa.2.2017.a008

early Islamic period *c.* 700 CE.[1] It focuses on specific aspects of that transition of special interest to the author, an eminent scholar of the eastern Roman Empire (particularly the Arabian, Red Sea, and Levantine regions) who in recent years has increasingly turned his attention to the nexus of late antique politics, culture, and religion and their significance for the genesis and early development of Islam. *Islam and Its Past* is a collected volume edited by Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook, distinguished scholars in the fields of Rabbinic Judaism and Islamic Studies respectively.[2] The volume is partially based on the papers given at a conference held at the University of California, Los Angeles on the occasion of Patricia Crone receiving the Levi della Vida award in 2013. The eight chapters therein are somewhat heterogeneous, but, as the title implies, all converge in one way or another on the subject of the Qurʾān or the historical background to the emergence of Islam. (Two of the chapters discuss the way that background is conceptualized or represented in Western scholarship and Muslim tradition respectively, and so remain thematically relevant although they are not specifically grounded in the Qurʾān or early tradition *per se*.)

Given the prominence of the scholars involved, these two volumes may reasonably be thought to represent the current state of the field in the study of the Qurʾān and its late antique milieu, as regards both the pre-Islamic Arabian context specifically and the wider Mediterranean and Near Eastern context more broadly. Viewed together, they encapsulate important trends in the contemporary study of Islamic origins. They also collectively demonstrate some of the conspicuous shortcomings of this field of research as a whole, particularly a general failure on the part of scholars to productively integrate different approaches and consider different bodies of evidence in analyzing the emergence of Islam.

I should emphasize at the outset that, taken on their own terms, both Bowersock's monograph and Bakhos and Cook's volume are eminently worthwhile, interesting contributions to the field; it is not the intention of this reviewer to hold any of the scholars whose work is discussed here individually accountable for the failings of the discipline as a whole. Rather, my goal is to contrast the approach and perspective exhibited in each of these works as they reflect particular problems endemic to the current study of the Qurʾān and Islamic origins.

In what follows here, I will outline the main arguments and insights of both of these books; offer some criticisms of each; and attempt to highlight

1. G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

2. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

the differences, even incongruities, in approach between them. These differences and incongruities appear to me to be illustrative of the way in which scholars of Late Antiquity working in a more historical vein and scholars of the Qur'ān and early tradition working in a more text-critical vein sometimes seem not to be talking to one another, but rather *past* one another. The concrete historiographic insights yielded in the study of pre-Islamic Arabia and neighboring regions or in critical reevaluations of early Muslim tradition often seem to be overlooked in the contemporary study of the Qur'ān. In turn, methodological advances in Qur'ānic Studies seem to be having only a limited impact on historians seeking to advance our knowledge of the circumstances in which Islam originated—if and when they are acknowledged at all.

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Bowersock begins his study with a prologue that addresses, in rather cursory fashion, the debates over sources that have impaired progress in the study of Islamic origins for some time. The author clearly has little patience for what he would perceive as radical revisionism. (This impatience is manifest in various ways throughout the book.) Bowersock acknowledges the recent works of Fred Donner, Robert Hoyland, and Aziz Al-Azmeh as different approaches to tackling the source problem, and favors Al-Azmeh's work—and his approach to "Paleo-Islam"—as the most successful of the three. This is somewhat curious, as it is at least this reviewer's impression that the reception of Al-Azmeh's work among specialists in the Qur'ān and early Islam has been rather mixed, while the contributions of Donner and Hoyland have been more influential. [3]

However, in the end it is perhaps not surprising that Al-Azmeh receives such praise from Bowersock, because their approaches to Islam's origins are fundamentally similar.[4] Both draw positivist conclusions about the

3. *The Crucible of Islam*, 3–9. Bowersock dismisses the work of Donner as too conditioned by contemporary ecumenism and that of Hoyland as placing too much trust in biased sources external to the early Islamic polity. For some interesting observations by Hoyland on the current state of the source problem and the debate around it, see his "Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017): 113–140; on the question of corroborating literary sources, even late ones, with material evidence, compare Harry Munt, "Oman and Late Sasanian Imperialism," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 28 (2017): 264–284.

4. See Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and cf. the reviews of G. R. Hawting in *JQS* 17 (2015): 114–118 and Karim Samji, "Method and Impasse: Critical Remarks on the Reconstruction of Formative Islam," *Der Islam* 93 (2016): 216-233; though they

Jāhiliyyah and the emergence of Islam based on their own critical appraisal of the available evidence, which often seems to hang on little more than a subjective intuition of which claims seem plausible and which less so. To more skeptical readers, Al-Azmeh may seem to simply be giving priority to evidence that confirms his own sense of what is going on in the period, with an arbitrariness that some will find hard to accept as really transcending or resolving the historiographic problems. Bowersock's own method, seeking to steer a middle path between uncritical acceptance and overly critical rejection of the sources, will probably meet the same kind of objections from skeptics. One's perception of the success or failure of such ventures will depend on one's sense of how convincing and coherent the results are, as well as one's degree of commitment to a particular picture of what is going on in the proto-Islamic and early Islamic periods. [5]

Chapter 1, on the Red Sea wars of Late Antiquity and the Ethiopian interventions in South Arabia up to the time of Abraha in the sixth century CE, is one of the most striking and to my mind successful chapters of the book. Here Bowersock offers a particularly robust but concise synthesis based on significant recent advances in research on South Arabia and other Red Sea communities, particularly the impact of Ethiopian imperial adventures in the Yemen, in the centuries and decades preceding Islam. Bowersock is a formidable authority on this period, and his treatment of it here is vigorous and convincing.[6] Unsurprisingly given his particular vantage as a historian of the

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expose somewhat different aspects of Al-Azmeh's project to critique, Hawting and Samji are united in their lack of enthusiasm for his approach to the source problem.

5. Likewise, Al-Azmeh's emphasis on "Paleo-Islam" as the result of largely indigenous religious developments in pagan Arabian society at first seems to be at odds with Bowersock's focus on an image of the Jāhiliyyah not as isolated from broader trends in the world of the late antique Near East, but rather as increasingly impacted by them. But here too they are united, insofar as both interpret the sources with a steadfast conviction that the Prophet's contemporaries were polytheists pure and simple; while Al-Azmeh sees the Ḥijāz in the Jāhiliyyah as an isolated island of persistent paganism, Bowersock sees its paganism as persisting despite its integration into the wider late antique world.

6. *The Crucible of Islam* is the third of a trilogy of short, accessible, but provocative works presenting Bowersock's ideas on the influence of the imperial conflicts over the Red Sea region in Late Antiquity on the emergence of Islam. See also the publication of his Menahem Stern lectures at the Historical Society of Israel in Jerusalem in 2011, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012) and his volume in the *Emblems of Antiquity* series, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Bowersock is only the most prominent scholar engaged in the contemporary revival of interest in the subject of the Red Sea in Late Antiquity and the interactions between Arabian and other cultures in the region; cf., e.g., George Hatke, "Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite

Roman East, in Bowersock's presentation the various principalities of Arabia (not only in the Yemen but also in the Ḥijāz and in the Syrian borderlands farther north) seem far less like isolated, remote territories on the periphery of the late antique *oikoumene* and more like significant and increasingly integrated tribal principalities swept up in the larger political currents of the day.[7] Thus, he tends to see cultural developments in the various Arab communities in this period as naturally reflecting prevailing trends in the wider Roman and Persian worlds at the time, not least of all Judaization and Christianization. Bolstered by significant advances in archaeological research of the last decade, Bowersock paints a picture in which the Yemen in particular can be understood as one of the main arenas in which the conjunction of imperial politics and monotheism that was characteristic of this era came to have an increasing impact on Arabia, as the pendulum swung between Roman or Axumite and Persian influence in the region and the native Arab population was repeatedly brought into contact with Jewish and Christian groups vying for control as proxies of one or another imperial power.[8] In the larger scheme, the gradual integration of Arabia into the Mediterranean-Near Eastern world at this time, and thus its increasing participation in the transnational or globalizing trends of the day, makes the irruption of the Arab conquerors

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Relations with Himyar in the Sixth Century C.E.," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010; Timothy Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, AD 500–1000* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2012); and the many publications on Yemen in Late Antiquity by Iwona Gajda, Christian Robin, and Paul Yule.

7. Bowersock places much less emphasis on the northern Arabian imperial frontier, for the most part mentioning Palmyra and the Ghassanid and Lakhmid polities only in passing (with the exception of one section in which the Ghassanids are cast as playing an extremely important role, on which see below). He also makes no mention of recent work on eastern Arabia. On the Jafnids/Ghassanids, see Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Denis Genequand and Christian Julien Robin (eds.), *Les Jafnides. Des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VI^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne)* (Orient et Méditerranée 17; Paris: De Boccard, 2015); on the Lakhmids, see Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥira: eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (IHC 104; Leiden: Brill, 2014); and on eastern Arabia, particularly the Syriac church of Beth Qaṭraye/Qatar, see Mario Kozah et al. (eds.), *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century* (GECS 38; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014).

8. As many scholars have noted over the years, Yemen continued to be a crucial arena for contacts between communities, and thus the transmission of various sorts of lore, well into the Islamic era; see, e.g., Raif Georges Khoury, "Story, Wisdom and Spirituality: Yemen as the Hub between the Persian, Arabic and Biblical Traditions," in Johann P. Arnason, Armando Salvatore, and Georg Stauth (eds.), *Islam in Process: Historical and Civilizational Perspectives* (Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam 7; Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2006), 190–219.

and the establishment of a new political, social, and religious order in the region in the seventh century after Muḥammad's mission seem almost like a foregone conclusion.

Chapter 2, on Arab paganism, is less a survey of the evidence and more a deliberate attempt to stake a position in an ongoing scholarly debate, insofar as Bowersock soundly rejects the claims of those contemporary scholars who would make of the religion of the Jāhiliyyah anything less than complete polytheism. He dismisses the currently popular idea of "pagan monotheism" as a scholarly fantasy; in this vein, he also rejects the idea that the Daughters of Allāh (who are not presented as such in the Qur'ān, Bowersock reminds us) were angels of the Judeo-Christian sort. In his view, in both the Qur'ān and the Arabian milieu, Allāt, Manāt, and al-'Uzzā were unambiguously autonomous entities, full-blown deities in their own right. Part and parcel of Bowersock's approach to the evidence here and elsewhere is his view that the *mushrikūn* of the Qur'ān were polytheists pure and simple. In this, Bowersock is clearly reacting against the work of scholars such as G. R. Hawting and Patricia Crone, whose criticism of the image of the Prophet's interlocutors as simple "pagans" has had enormous repercussions in the field of Qur'ānic Studies over the last fifteen years or so.[9]

Bowersock's anti-revisionism sets the stage for the discussion of Mecca in Chapter 3, in which he explicitly targets and rebuts Crone's classic work challenging the traditional accounts of Mecca's economic prominence.[10] There is something self-consciously atavistic about Bowersock's common-

9. See *The Crucible of Islam*, 36–42. Bowersock is perhaps correct that recent work on "pagan monotheism" sometimes seems to overstate its case on the basis of ambiguous evidence, but he surely overstates his own as well in dismissing pagan monotheism as self-evidently a contradiction in terms. In the end, the point of such research is to promote a critical interrogation and reevaluation of the category of monotheism in the Greco-Roman and late antique milieus, similar to that which has taken place for the category as operative in ancient Israel. This case seems to me to be analogous to that of the so-called 'parting of the ways' between Judaism and Christianity: for some scholars 'Jew' and 'Christian' remain natural categories to deploy in speaking of the early centuries CE, whereas research of the last fifteen years has aimed at critiquing not only the notion of a decisive 'parting' accomplished shortly after the emergence of gentile Christianity but the very terms 'Jew' and 'Christian' as representing stable categories in the period.

10. Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987; repr. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015); see also Crone's later articles revisiting the subject, "How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?," *BSOAS* 68 (2005): 387–399 and "Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade," *BSOAS* 70 (2005): 63–88, reprinted in her *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters. Collected Studies in Three Volumes, Volume 1*, ed. Hanna Siurua (IHC 129; Leiden, Brill, 2016), 1–20 and 21–51 respectively.

sense approach to the Meccan scene in which Muḥammad first preached Islam, as when he states pointedly that "if we have not returned precisely to the image [of Mecca] promulgated by Montgomery Watt… we are no longer far removed from it."[11] (The invocation of the name of Watt here cannot be accidental, given that he was the *bête noire* of Crone and other scholars who rejected the positivism of mid-twentieth-century Western scholarship on the Qur'ān.) There is also something deliberately matter-of-fact about Bowersock's position regarding the actual stimuli that precipitated the emergence of Islam. What is to Bowersock the indisputable fact of the overwhelming paganism of the Ḥijāzī Arabs is here somewhat uncomfortably juxtaposed with the significant inroads into the peninsula made by Abrahamic monotheism, such that he deems the appearance of Arabian prophets not only unsurprising but almost inevitable. (Here Bowersock succumbs—as others have, including myself—to the temptation to see the *riddah* prophets not as mere imitators of Muḥammad but as genuine, if far less consequential, products of the same cultural context of prophetic ferment that gave rise to Muḥammad himself, a view now challenged quite vigorously by Hawting, as we shall see below.[12])

Chapters 4 and 5 address the intensification of the wider imperial struggles in which Arabia was embroiled in the decades immediately preceding the career of the Prophet. [13] Chapter 4 returns to the topic of Ethiopia, imperial Axum having loomed large in the Arabian horizon for centuries by the time of Muḥammad's birth, and its influence continuing even then despite the collapse of the Ethiopian imperial project in Yemen, with Abraha's breakaway principality supplanted by direct Persian suzerainty imposed around 570 CE. Bowersock's special interest in and emphasis on the links between Ethiopia and Arabia lead him to underscore the significance of the seldom-discussed 'first *hijrah*,' the temporary relocation of some of Muḥammad's followers to Axum around 615, which anticipated the final migration of the entire community to Yathrib-Medina in 622. He reads the event of the first *hijrah* not only as evidence of the continuing impact of Ethiopia in Arabian affairs (this time in the Ḥijāz rather than the Yemen) but of a special intimacy between Axumite

11. *The Crucible of Islam*, 53. Crone had much to say over the last decade of her life on the subject of the Meccan religious scene; see below.

12. Ibid., 58–63. Compare my "Ahab, Bar Kokhba, Muhammad, and the Lying Spirit: Prophetic Discourse before and after the Rise of Islam," in Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas (eds.), *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (TSAJ 146; Berlin: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 271–313, esp. 32–37.

13. Starting even before this point and becoming more noticeable here in these chapters, Bowersock sometimes presents themes, characters, concepts, and so forth that have already been mentioned in previous chapters as if they are only appearing for the first time, which is frequently disconcerting for the reader.

Christianity and the early *ummah*. Thus, Bowersock speculates that at least some of the passages addressed to the People of the Book in the Qur'ān are aimed directly at the Ethiopians, for example those passages that express belief in the Virgin Birth and God's inspiration of Jesus while also insisting that Jesus is not divine, but rather God is one (e.g., Q Nisā' 4:171).[14]

In Chapter 5, Bowersock leaps ahead to a later phase in the decades-long confrontation between Christian Rome and Sasanian Persia, examining the circumstances and repercussions of the Persian invasion of Jerusalem in 614–615, which provides the larger context for the Medinan phase of Muḥammad's career (discussed in the next chapter). Here Bowersock emphasizes two points of particular significance: the Jewish community as recipients of special patronage by the Sasanians (another theme of consequence for the next chapter) and the often overstated impact of the Persian invasion of Palestine. Citing recent archaeological research, Bowersock refutes the age-old claim that the ground was laid for the Arab conquests by the devastation and exhaustion of communities in the Holy Land by the Persians in the years immediately previous; this anticipates his discussion further on of the repercussions of the Arab conquests themselves.

Chapter 6, on the Medinan phase of Muḥammad's career, is a particularly robust treatment of the subject that demonstrates the potentially fruitful results of the kind of cautious positivism Bowersock advocates here. Certainly not all scholars will be comfortable with his enthusiasm for the historicity of the traditional accounts here. But overall, it is hard to deny the appeal of Bowersock's synthesis, particularly his depiction of the circumstances surrounding the emerging prophetic state, as his account coheres well with the thick context he has provided for it in previous chapters. His account relies on certain presuppositions about the conditions that made the formation of that first Islamic state in northwest Arabia possible—in particular the premise that Yathrib had long been inhabited by a significant Jewish community with ties to Palestine, as well as that the circumstances of the early 600s (particularly the conflict over Muḥammad's mission in Mecca and ongoing tribal conflict

14. The *tafsīr* and *sīrah* literature sometimes associate the Qur'ān with Axum and the first *hijrah* in various ways, as in anecdotes depicting the recitation of verses from the revelation by a follower of Muḥammad at the court of the Negus; thus, Ibn Isḥāq has an account of one of the Companions reciting the recently revealed Q Maryam 19:16–21 (the Nativity) for him. Reading the Medinan Q 4:171 in this context is idiosyncratic, as is Bowersock's emphasis on dialogue with the Ethiopians as the larger frame for the Qur'ān's messaging about Christianity, but it is a significant part of his overarching argument that the various traces of evidence for the Prophet's interactions with the Negus form a "dossier" that corroborates Muḥammad's early attempts at forging solidarity, if not a lasting alliance, between the *ummah* and Axum.

in Yathrib) presented various parties, especially the Byzantines, with a unique diplomatic and political opportunity in the Ḥijāz.

Bowersock relies heavily here on the recent work of Lecker, who plausibly argues that the *hijrah* (that is, the second *hijrah* in 622) occurred on account of the Ghassanids' availability and willingness to play a "supervenient role" in mediating between the Byzantines and Muḥammad. As Bowersock puts it, this theory "addresses both the self-interest and political diplomacy of the several parties to the agreement at the same time as invoking their religious and tribal allegiances from an international perspective that encompasses both Byzantium and Persia."[15] Lecker's hypothesis is that Heraclius understood that Persian intentions in the region, particularly their attempt to expand their influence in northwest Arabia through Jewish proxies as they had previously done in the Yemen, could be thwarted and their diplomatic efforts outflanked by the Byzantines' exertion of their own influence in the region through the Ghassanids.[16] Thus, at Byzantine prompting, the Banū Ghassān served as imperial agents encouraging the various rival factions in Yathrib to come together under the leadership of the Prophet, who found refuge there for his increasingly persecuted community in Mecca.

It has long been conventional for scholars to acknowledge that the activities of the Banū Lakhm and Banū Ghassān as imperial *foederati* anticipated a greater role for the Arabs in imperial affairs, culminating in the total disruption of the established imperial system by the Arab conquests under the Rashidun.[17] What is novel in this approach is both the extension of political significance to the Banū Ghassān past the point of the apparent

15. *The Crucible of Islam*, 108.

16. See Michael Lecker, "Were the Ghassānids and the Byzantines behind Muḥammad's *hijra*?" in Genequand and Robin (eds.), *Les Jafnides*, 277–293. Bowersock highlights Lecker's major insight as the detection of the coincidence between Heraclius' counterattack against the Persians and the *hijrah*, though I read Lecker's most significant discovery here as his observation of the Ghassanid tribal links as the factor that appears to have united (and lubricated cooperation and coordination between) various parties among the Aws, Khazraj, and the Jews of Medina.

17. In some accounts the collapse of the centralizing project of political consolidation under Ghassān plays a central role in directly stimulating the rise of Islam, in that the dissipation of the Byzantine-Jafnid condominium at the northwest frontier between Syria and the Ḥijāz creates both instability and a power vacuum ripe for exploitation by ambitious parties, including, eventually, the *ummah* under the Prophet's leadership. Its more radical propositions aside, this is the basic thesis of the controversial work of Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* (London: Little, Brown, 2012), a book reviled by many for its unfettered revisionist claims and subjected to rough treatment by Bowersock himself in his review in the *Guardian* of May 4, 2012 (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/04/in-shadow-of-sword-tom-holland).

marginalization and overthrow in the 580s of the Jafnid chiefs who had led the Ghassanid confederation and the attribution of a direct intermediary role in orchestrating the *hijrah* to Ghassanid agents, as well as an indirect role in fostering the creation of the early Islamic state to the Byzantines. (The implication, of course, is that Muḥammad was then to be groomed as a Byzantine proxy himself, though this is not explicitly stated by Bowersock.) The subversive role of the Jews in northwestern Arabia as agents of the Sasanians (following on their supposedly having played a similar role during the Persian invasion of Palestine) was thereby anticipated and circumvented.[18]

The final three chapters of *The Crucible of Islam* address the succession to Muḥammad, the dynasties of the Rashidun and the Umayyads, and—the culminating point of proto- and early Islamic history from the late antiquitist's perspective—the construction of the Dome of the Rock.[19] Overall a particularly conspicuous conservatism reigns here, Bowersock's occasional nod to revisionist historiography notwithstanding (e.g., the aforementioned conjecture that the *riddah* prophets were authentic products of their time and not mere imitators of Muḥammad). Attempts at revisionist reappraisal of the post-prophetic phase of Islam's emergence, for example the attempt to counterbalance traditional claims by turning to outside sources, seem to have little traction with Bowersock, who by and large deems divergent accounts from Jewish or Christian sources on the conquests to reflect a natural tendency towards distortion and not some hidden truth subsequently concealed by Muslim historians and traditionists for doctrinal reasons.

Throughout these chapters, Bowersock emphasizes that the state the conquerors built—and the Islam they and their descendants ultimately shaped—reflected and dovetailed into the wider environment. The early Arab rulers styled themselves according to the imperial conventions of the day;

18. One detects here a lamentable, though no doubt inadvertent, echo of an age-old trope of Jewish collusion and treachery, manifest in (e.g.) Christian sources on the Arab conquests from Iraq to Spain and later appropriated and reversed by Muslim accounts on the Reconquista.

19. One notices several slight but conspicuous errors of interpretation or emphasis in these chapters, some of which are rather puzzling. The Sasanian shah is said to rule from Baghdad; ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib is identified as belonging not to the tribe of Quraysh but rather Hāshim, as if the latter were not part of the former; the Kharijites are depicted as emerging at the moment of "civil insurrection" against ʿAlī that culminated in the Battle of the Camel, rather than during the confrontation at Siffin; ʿAlī is identified as the supreme martyr of the Shi'ah, rather than Ḥusayn; the Ahl al-Sunnah emerged in the First Fitnah as partisans of Muʿāwiyah and the Umayyads; and so forth. Bowersock's overall command of this material is more than adequate, but minor lapses of this sort prove disconcerting to the specialist reader as they pile up over time.

they ruled though proxies drawn from local elites according to the established conventions of the time; and overall, to their profit, they sought to disrupt established economic and social patterns as little as possible. As elsewhere in the book, here Bowersock demonstrates with great lucidity how in its genesis, development, and maturation, Islam was thoroughly a product of its time and not a foreign intrusion into the affairs of the late antique world.[20]

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As noted at the beginning of this essay—and as its editors themselves openly acknowledge—the contents of *Islam and Its Past* are unavoidably heterogeneous; some derive from the conference in Patricia Crone's honor that precipitated the collection, while others were commissioned later. Nevertheless, the volume is largely cohesive and stands as a fitting testimony both to Crone's legacy and to the diversity of approaches found in the contemporary study of the Qur'ān and Islamic origins.[21]

The collection leads off, appropriately enough, with a very fine survey of the current state of the field of Qur'ānic Studies by Devin Stewart. It has been some time since an adequate stock-taking of the field of this sort has been published, and so Stewart's essay provides a much-needed service to scholarship, especially in that he discusses a number of areas in which the field has grown tremendously in recent years. Additionally, the author's knowledge of both historical and contemporary scholarship on the Qur'ān is nothing short of prodigious, and so he is able to map contemporary developments against a deep historical context. This piece will surely prove indispensable in teaching and research on the Qur'ān in coming years.

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20. The clarity of Bowersock's argumentation and the elegance of his prose are aspects of his work that indisputably set him apart from Al-Azmeh, whose turgid and insistently, unapologetically jargon-laden writing style often presents an insurmountable stumbling block not only to students but to other scholars as well.

21. While the overall vision of the volume is commendable, one notices that it seems to have been rather hastily edited in places. For example, in the long essay by Stewart, a very significant and thoughtful piece, there are considerable repetitions that should have been spotted by an editor. Likewise, on a more mechanical level—and here the responsibility surely lies with the publisher and not the editors—there are persistent and conspicuous inconsistencies in style found throughout the volume, specifically regarding transliteration of technical terms, capitalization, and italicization. These are highly distracting, especially as they sometimes appear in a single paragraph or even a single sentence, e.g.: Qur'anic studies/qur'anic studies; *ḥadīth/Ḥadīth*; surah/*surah*; *tafsīr/Tafsīr*. Likewise, the notes and bibliography sometimes seem to be plagued by minor but noticeable glitches, and varying styles of citation are in evidence in different chapters; for example, the rendering of the titles of Arabic works seems to differ from chapter to chapter.

It is not possible to comment at length on the many useful and provocative observations Stewart makes about the field here, and so I must confine myself to a few short points germane to my larger purpose in this essay. One is particularly struck by the enormous diversity of contemporary scholarly activity on the Qur'ān he maps here, including a number of subfields that barely existed even ten years ago. (This is somewhat ironic, insofar as this diversity is not reflected in the contents of the volume, a point to which I shall return presently.) Nevertheless, Stewart observes that many productive avenues of research explored in previous generations have not been adequately taken up in contemporary scholarship, especially pertaining to linguistic, stylistic, and literary approaches to the Qur'ān. Moreover, he issues a stern and much-needed note of caution, inasmuch as a significant amount of contemporary work seems to inadvertently recapitulate that of older scholars, whose contributions are either overlooked or just not taken seriously. The result is a field of scholarly endeavor that has enormous growth potential, yet is chronically inchoate and frequently incapable or unwilling to build on previous breakthroughs in any systematic way. Stewart also notes—quite correctly in my view—that many contemporary scholars have developed such an allergy to reliance on traditional sources that they ignore the many useful, even indispensable, lessons to be learned from those sources, especially in regard to the study of qur'ānic language and rhetoric.

Michael Cook's contribution comes later in the volume, but it is in some ways analogous to Stewart's and so should be mentioned here. While this chapter, "Early Medieval Christian and Muslim Attitudes to Pagan Law," might at first glance seem incongruous with the rest of the volume, the focus of the piece is on Muslim scholarly apprehensions of the Jāhiliyyah; thus, it is an interesting complement to Stewart's survey of Western scholarly apprehensions of the Qur'ān. Both chapters are second-order reflections on scholarly attitudes towards and perceptions of the background to Islam—one focusing on pre-modern, insider perspectives and the other on modern, outsider perspectives—and thus stand apart from the other chapters. Cook's tidy discussion draws a sharp and instructive distinction between medieval Christian jurists' tolerance for and readiness to accommodate pagan law as such (even sometimes characterizing pagan law as implicitly compatible with the divine will or revealed law) and Muslim jurists' discomfort with the idea of pagan law and insistence that the inevitable holdovers from pagan practice of the Jāhiliyyah that survived into the Islamic era must have been explicitly confirmed as legitimate by the Prophet. This difference Cook attributes to the fact that Islam initially developed as a law unto itself, independent of the rule of others and so completely autonomous from other compelling regimes of truth; in contrast, the early Christians were for centuries forced to acquiesce to Roman law, imposed as the norm by the dominant Roman society.

Apart from these two chapters, the other contribution that seems somewhat anomalous is that of Iwona Gajda, who addresses current research on the wider late antique context from the perspective of material culture, specifically epigraphic and archaeological evidence. This is worth reflecting upon for a moment, in that—despite the aforementioned heterogeneity of the topics discussed in it—the scope and range of methodologies represented among the chapters of this volume is, as it turns out, relatively limited. Only Gajda's chapter approaches the late antique or early Islamic period primarily through a corpus of material outside of the Qur'ān and Muslim traditional literature; it is also the only chapter that deals directly with non-literary evidence. The narrowness of the book on the whole stands in sharp contrast to the diversity of approaches in the contemporary field charted by Stewart in its opening chapter. Even if we limit ourselves to areas of research dedicated to the study of the formative period of Islam specifically (and thus exclude significant facets of the contemporary field such as the study of the Qur'ān as literature, medieval and modern contexts and reception, feminist criticism, and so forth), the scope of methods and evidence here in *Islam and Its Past* still appears unnecessarily and avoidably narrow, and fails to represent the diversity of work within or adjacent to Qur'ānic Studies being done today.[22]

Gajda's "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia" is a brief note (nine pages!) surveying recent archaeological and epigraphic discoveries that demonstrate the complexity of the religious and political environment in South Arabia, particularly Ḥimyar, in the centuries leading up to the rise of Islam. For the most part her treatment aligns with Bowersock's account of this milieu, albeit entirely from the Yemenite rather than the Ethiopian side. The main point that she emphasizes here is that both on the official and popular level, aspects of traditional religious customs and ideas—that is, antedating the conversion of Ḥimyar to monotheism—seem to have persisted well after said "conversion." This cannot be considered evidence that the Ḥimyarite state did not convert to Judaism, of course, only that the religious terrain remained fluid and variegated, even at elite levels. At the same time, there can hardly be doubt that a significant shift did occur in the fourth century, with royal inscriptions invoking an official religion that was either Judaism or some

22. This narrowness is similarly reflected in another recent edited volume in the field, Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (eds.), *Qur'ānic Studies Today* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), in which every contribution focuses on literary, philological, and comparative analysis of the qur'ānic text. This stands in sharp contrast with an earlier volume on the Qur'ān co-edited by Neuwirth that featured a much greater diversity of methodological approaches, including a number of significant studies engaging material culture and archaeological evidence: Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

kind of autonomous monotheism with a Hebraic cast (dubbed "Raḥmānism" by some).

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The other five chapters of *Islam and Its Past* are more directly relevant to the issues with which we are specifically concerned here, in that they are all attempts to come to terms with the Qur'ān and traditional sources (primarily *sīrah* and *ḥadīth*) as evidence for Islamic origins. The contributions of Nicolai Sinai, Joseph Witztum, Angelika Neuwirth, and Patricia Crone are solely or mainly concerned with literary and text-critical analysis of the qur'ānic *textus receptus*; most of them discuss conjectured literary parallels to or subtexts of qur'ānic passages, and all are interested in inferring a possible revelatory or compositional process or context in the nascent Muslim community. They differ in the degree to which they are willing to engage with or rely on traditional material to reconstruct that process or provide such context, though all depend on some degree on the basic outline of what we know (or think we know) about the Qur'ān's gradual revelation during the Meccan and Medinan periods, while also taking care not to assume too much about what can only be discerned on the basis of the traditional sources. In contrast to these four 'Qur'ān-centric' chapters, the contribution of Hawting is more specifically concerned with the reliability of Muslim sources for reconstructing the immediate historical context of the revelation of the Qur'ān, or rather, with the limits of what can be known about the Arabian context due to our inevitable dependence on those sources.

Nicolai Sinai's chapter, "Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion in Two Medinan Surahs," is perhaps the most original contribution to the volume, in that it showcases a new methodology for the analysis of the qur'ānic text. Here, the author offers an extremely sophisticated (and admirably clear, given the complexity of the material) model for evaluating the growth of compositional strata within qur'ānic *sūrah*s. There is some precedent for this, though scholars have usually sought to isolate secondary insertions in Meccan-period *sūrah*s, whereas here Sinai proposes to discern additions in the longer Medinan chapters. He articulates a set of systematic criteria for evaluating proposed cases of compositional growth that holds significant promise for scholars interested in such stratigraphic analysis. In brief, in Sinai's model, a purported addition to an earlier *sūrah* must be readily removable from its current redactional setting without doing violence to the coherence of the passage at hand, on the basis of some clear indication of why the insertion is anomalous as it was redacted into that passage; the result should be a discernibly improved and more coherent text. After brief discussion of a classic case of a Medinan intrusion into a Meccan text

(Q Muddaththir 74:31, the long, rambling gloss on the previous verse's cryptic statement "over it are nineteen"), Sinai tackles two examples of passages in Medinan *sūrah*s that are plausibly construed as the result of developmental growth in multiple stages. The results are intriguing and eminently worth the considerable effort that careful analysis of the proposed compositional-redactional process requires.

In the first example, Sinai unravels layers of commentary on core elements of the opening statements about dietary restrictions in Sūrah 5, yielding the interesting hypothesis that the original intention of the core statement in Q Mā'idah 5:5 about the food of Ahl al-Kitāb being licit for believers—difficult to square with dietary restrictions being imposed in the very same passage—was in fact *to abrogate dietary prohibitions entirely*, rendering all the food of the People of the Book (including the pork of the Christians) licit for both Muḥammad's community and Jews. In Sinai's second case study, he dissolves the notoriously difficult Q Tawbah 9:1–11 into two distinct passages and three redactional layers, countenancing a number of different solutions to the pericope's manifest contradictions. Notably, the solution Sinai favors is that an originally more irenic and conciliatory passage was later subordinated to a secondary addition that legislated a rather more strident policy regarding the treatment of unbelievers. Sinai's analysis of this passage reveals a developmental history not wholly reconcilable with an orthodox view; nevertheless, his results are fundamentally congruous with the traditional account of a transition in the early community from lesser to greater truculence against the *mushrikūn*. Here, Q 9:5, the famous Sword Verse, abides, as it does in Muslim jurisprudence and commentary, as the culmination of the mature 'jihad theory' of the emergent *ummah*.

Joseph Witztum's contribution to *Islam and Its Past*, "'O Believers, Be Not as Those Who Hurt Moses': Q Aḥzāb 33:69 and Its Exegesis," is perhaps more conventional in its methodology, yet likewise offers significant conclusions. Witztum proceeds using a method often in evidence in his much-cited dissertation—as well as in the work of certain recent precursors, most notably Gabriel Said Reynolds—of revisiting interpretive cruxes in the Qur'ān that were examined by previous generations of scholars and correlated with biblical, Jewish, or Christian parallels, but doing so with greater philological acumen and methodological self-awareness.[23] Here, the argument of some older scholars that Q 33:69's cryptic reference to "those who hurt Moses" is an allusion to the biblical episode of Aaron and Miriam's opposition to

23. This methodology is in ample evidence in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010) and Joseph Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2011.

Moses's taking a foreign wife (recounted in Numbers 12) is vindicated. What makes Witztum's treatment of this subject interesting is that he marshals a number of different types of evidence in favor of the argument, including the larger context of Sūrah 33, in which marital issues seem to recur as topoi of concern; lexical parallels between this passage and others in the Qur'ān; and, most strikingly, a variant reading of the verse associated with Ibn Masʿūd in which the suggested lexical change—or possibly original reading (*ʿabdī* for *ʿinda*)—reveals a conspicuous parallel with Numbers 12:7–8, where Moses is called God's servant (*ʿavdī*). Witztum concludes by comparing this passage with two others in the Qur'ān that "clearly reflect the disquiet that afflicted the Prophet's large and complicated household"; all three are explicated through a number of extra-qur'ānic traditions that demonstrate that the Prophet's marriages appear to have been a perennial source of conflict and dissension in the early community. This supports at least the broad conjecture that the passage's condemnation of the harm done to Moses by accusations about his wife would have been meaningful in such a context.[24]

Appropriately enough, the next two chapters supply a larger context for biblical-qur'ānic parallels of this sort, albeit in rather different ways. The contribution of Patricia Crone, "Pagan Arabs as God-fearers," both builds upon and complements a number of other articles Crone published over the decade before her untimely passing in 2015. Her approach here is similar to that of a number of other studies in which she conjectures about the religious worldview of the Prophet's opponents.[25] *Pace* the view of both Muslim tradition and Western scholars (including Bowersock, as we have seen) that they were simple pagans, Crone infers from the statements the Qur'ān attributes to them that these opponents' cultural outlook was in fact heavily biblicized, though they rejected certain key doctrines of the biblical heritage as then understood by Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity, particularly the resurrection of the body. In this chapter, Crone's specific emphasis is on postulating that the *mushrikūn* or "pagans" of Muḥammad's time were

24. The domestic arrangements of the Prophet's household and their implications for subsequent law and practice have of course been of great interest to both traditional exegetes and modern scholars, both as they impinge upon the Qur'ān itself and as they are understood in *tafsīr*. See David S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and *Zayd* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); cf. Pavel Pavlovitch, *The Formation of the Islamic Understanding of Kalāla in the Second Century AH (718–816 CE): Between Scripture and Canon* (IHC 126; Leiden: Brill, 2016).

25. See the articles collected in her *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters*, and compare her posthumous contribution to volume 1 of this journal, "'Nothing But Time Destroys Us': The Deniers of Resurrection in the Qur'ān," *JIQSA* 1 (2016): 127–147.

basically God-fearers—that "Israelites" were prevalent in the environment, and many Arab polytheists were proximate enough to them to have gradually but incompletely assimilated their ideas, language, and practices without formally converting *per se*. Among her most trenchant observations here are that the Qur'ān's rather low standards for defining inclusion in the community of Believers—profession of God's oneness, prayer, and payment of *zakāt*—are essentially identical to the distinctive markers of the pagan God-fearer in antiquity; that the Prophet's polemic against his interlocutors presupposes that they have a basic respect for the Jewish scriptures and for the ultimate truth claims associated with the Israelite tradition; and that it is this proximity to the ambient "Israelite" culture that ensured that the Prophet's audience was familiar enough with biblical references that they could understand them even as they were manipulated and recast in complex ways.

Crone's conjectures about the emergence of the proto-Islamic movement in a thoroughly biblicized environment dovetail nicely with those adumbrated in Angelika Neuwirth's contribution, "Locating the Qur'an and Early Islam in the 'Epistemic Space' of Late Antiquity." Neuwirth has of course published extensively in the past on the subject of the biblical underpinnings of the qur'ānic revelation, interpreted specifically as a manifestation of late antique scripturalism. Her chapter here is a particularly successful and concise crystallization of her views on this subject. After an introductory section in which she criticizes scholars who continue to analyze the Qur'ān and early Islam in isolation from the Western monotheistic tradition, Neuwirth demonstrates the necessity of understanding Late Antiquity as a *Denkraum*, an "epistemic space," in which "textual controversies are staged between confederates and opponents from diverse theological realms," and not only discrete traditions drawn from the Israelite scriptural legacy but distinct strategies of reading and argumentation pass freely from one community to another.[26] Using specific examples from the Abraham and Moses narrative complexes in the Qur'ān, Neuwirth vividly demonstrates how the development of the qur'ānic corpus reflects a dialogical process in which biblical material and awareness is first

26. Angelika Neuwirth, "Locating the Qur'an," in Bakhos and Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past*, 167. Neuwirth's specific allusion to *Denkraum* or "epistemic space" here (corresponding, one infers, to the use of *imaginaire* in French theory and historiography to refer to the subjective symbolic order that holds a community or society together) is similarly evoked in a recent German volume she co-edited: Nora Schmidt, Nora K. Schmid, and Angelika Neuwirth (eds.), *Denkraum Spätantike: Reflexionen von Antiken im Umfeld des Koran* (Episteme in Bewegung 5; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016). The focus on *episteme* or *imaginaire* is also what presumably inspires the title of another recent volume of essays on the diverse religious cultures of the period, Kirill Dmitriev and Isabel Toral-Niehoff (eds.), *Religious Culture in Late Antique Arabia: Selected Studies on the Late Antique Religious Mind* (IHC 6; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017).

transferred to the emergent community and then the community articulates its responses to the assimilation of that knowledge, synthesizing it with late antique Arabian culture.

Neuwirth then dissects this process into a tripartite scheme, which she terms the *staging*, *penetrating*, and *eclipsing* of biblical tradition. The earliest revelations to emerge as a result of the dialogue with biblical tradition are imitations of psalms, Arabizations of biblical motifs, and adaptations of traditional Arabian forms to communicate biblical concepts; somewhat later, the community's appropriation of the Bible is more fully realized as it comes to identify symbolically with the Israelites and map biblical history onto its own experience (or vice versa); then, in the final stage, the Qur'ān and its community become full participants in the ongoing (and contentious) scriptural discourse of the Ahl al-Kitāb, self-confidently asserting not only their own exegeses of the biblical tradition but the validity of their hermeneutics as superior to those of the Jews and Christians. Throughout this piece, Neuwirth emphasizes—as she has in many previous publications—the importance of understanding the qur'ānic community's agency and virtuosity in its engagement with the Bible and other scripturalist communities.

Gerald Hawting's contribution to the volume, "Were there Prophets in the Jahiliyya?", is in some sense a classic exercise in the methodology he has pursued in previous studies, most notably *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*. According to this method, rather than viewing the statements of classical and medieval sources of Muslim tradition regarding the circumstances in which the Qur'ān was revealed as presenting basically reliable historical data, Hawting demonstrates that a corpus of material handed down by the tradition was most likely generated to serve the particular needs of the later community, especially in helping to make sense of the Qur'ān, rather than preserving objectively verifiable facts. Hawting's interrogation of the traditional sources on the Jāhiliyyah in *The Idea of Idolatry* opened up new vistas for research because it showed that there was much more to the religious and cultural background to the Qur'ān than the simple characterization of the Quraysh as "pagans" would allow; not coincidentally, it also helped to better locate the qur'ānic community in the late antique worldview and discourses in which it was embedded.

Notably, Hawting's exercise of a similar procedure here seems in this instance to actually foreclose upon research of this sort. *Pace* those who have speculated that Muḥammad's career was not *sui generis* in the environment but rather was part of a larger prophetic ferment in late antique Arabia, Hawting shows that the only available evidence for such ferment—the accounts of Muḥammad's quasi-prophetic predecessors and contemporaries, especially the *ḥanīf*s and so-called *riddah* prophets—comes from the traditional sources. This material, as he shows, is quite likely to have been generated for exegetical

or doctrinal purposes. While the existence of genuine claimants to prophecy in the biblical tradition before or contemporary with Muḥammad would certainly improve our understanding of the larger context for his mission, we simply do not have any objective basis for this beyond mere speculation.

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As should be apparent by now, the differences between the approaches to the Qur'ān and the early Islamic milieu exhibited by Bowersock on the one hand and most (if not all) of the contributors to *Islam and Its Past* on the other are stark. Bowersock is at his strongest when he focuses on the larger political, cultural, religious, and social context for Islam's origins—the eponymous crucible in which both the early movement under the Prophet and classical forms of expression under the caliphs were shaped. (I would reiterate at this stage the particular value of the first chapter of *The Crucible of Islam*, on the Red Sea wars; this, to me, should be essential reading for any scholar working on the period or any university course dealing with the topic.) While many scholars have paid lip service to the importance of considering Islam's origins in the context of late antiquity, it often seems that advertising such a focus or orientation serves primarily to signal an interest in examining the Qur'ān in the light of Jewish and Christian literary comparanda of the period, rather than serious reflection on larger issues concerning the pre- or proto-Islamic period in this historical context.[27] In contrast, the synthesis on the period Bowersock offers here in *The Crucible of Islam* is robust and useful, and would undoubtedly be of benefit to scholars of the Qur'ān seeking to think more deeply about that historical context (as they should).

However, a major problem—as already noted—is Bowersock's strident resistance to principles or ideas associated with the contemporary study

27. A point raised by Stewart in his discussion of the state of the field, in which he also trenchantly notes that the "Late Antiquity" label sometimes appears to serve as a marketing tool for classicists to emphasize the larger significance of their work on late Roman provincial Christianity or other such topics—"a way to argue that studying Christian topics in the centuries before Islam was somehow making grander statements about human history than a label like fifth-century Egypt would suggest" ("Reflections on the State of the Art," in Bakhos and Cook [eds.], *Islam and Its Past*, 30–31). He is not wrong in principle, though I feel compelled to point out that late antique Christian Egypt is a topic that offers much of potential benefit to scholars of Islam as well, especially as the subject lends itself to consideration of larger processes of cultural change and religious adaptation that persisted well into the early Islamic period: see, e.g. David Frankfurter's new book *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). I would argue that Frankfurter's work epitomizes the kind of serious engagement with larger issues that precisely justifies the use of the rubric "Late Antiquity."

of the Qur'ān that one might deem "revisionist," but that in fact have become rather mainstream among scholars working in the field, especially over the last ten years or so. Again, scholars who have become acclimated to an instinctive skepticism regarding our ability to locate qur'ānic passages in a concrete compositional or revelatory context—or, for that matter, regarding the possibility of recovering anything but the sketchiest outline of a reliable biography of the historical Muḥammad—will likely be alienated by Bowersock's positivistic treatment of various aspects of the circumstances and events of the life and career of the Prophet and how they are reflected in the Qur'ān, as well as by his implicit or explicit dismissal of the work of scholars such as Crone and Hawting.

In some cases Bowersock's claims rely on the work of others who build on a foundation of critical reevaluation of the sources (for example Lecker, as noted above). In other cases, those claims are staked on his own critical reading of the evidence. Admittedly, his predisposition towards a more conservative approach is understandable. For one thing, to execute a study such as this one, seeking to trace a historical trajectory over several centuries, one must inevitably make certain positivistic commitments if one is to establish and traverse a linear path. Attempting to survey and make sense of the larger trends spanning the later phases of the Roman-Persian conflict, the various stages of Ethiopian imperialism in Yemen, the gradual integration of Arabia into the Mediterranean-Near Eastern world system, and the Arabs' own intervention into—and eventual transformation of—that world system would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, if one was compelled to interrogate the sources and take skeptical perspectives into account at every turn. Caution about traditional claims is obviously merited, but if one indulges every possible doubt about major watershed moments or seminal developments in the period—calling into question whether Muḥammad existed, whether the Qur'ān is really the cultural product of late sixth and early seventh-century Ḥijāz, whether major battles that established the *ummah* at the head of an imperial state left traces in the Qur'ān, and so forth—these questions become bumps in the road that accumulate and render smooth, linear progress of the sort that a narrative such as Bowersock's requires difficult, or even impossible.[28]

28. This is perhaps the most obvious factor that makes it challenging to shift to a more critical presentation of Islamic origins in the classroom. For a successful attempt at modeling a critical approach and integrating revisionist perspectives into an elementary presentation of Islamic origins in an accessible way, see Gabriel Said Reynolds' textbook *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012).

Another element informing Bowersock's perspective on the period is his position as an historian of the Roman East. He notes the relative obscurity of specific points in his history, for example the decades between the collapse of the Ethiopian regime in Yemen in the later sixth century and the Persian invasion of Jerusalem in the early seventh.[29] But generally, from the vantage of Roman history, the late antique centuries may scan as a generally comprehensible sequence of developments, in which Muḥammad's prophetic career and the origins of the Islamic state may appear overall relatively legible. This, in fact, is the kind of perspective that makes contemplation of Late Antiquity as a broader period particularly worthwhile for Islamicists. But it is also perhaps the perspective that explains Bowersock's readiness to accept many of the details of the Prophet's life as provided by traditional sources, or the polytheism of Muḥammad's interlocutors as a given.

On the other hand, scholars of the Qurʾān and Islamic origins often contemplate the same period and actually perceive it to be relatively opaque, specifically because their attention tends to be drawn to what we do not know and perhaps *cannot* know, at least with real certainty—the compositional process that created the Qurʾān, its literary and cultural background, the circumstances of the revelation and redaction of its constituent parts, the beginnings of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, the actual demographics of his audience, and so forth. Focusing on these issues, the period seems quite obscure indeed. In contrast to the positivism of an historian like Bowersock, this is the perspective informing many of the contributions to *Islam and Its Past*. This explains the tentative and agnostic attitude exhibited by many of their authors, an attitude that is common enough among specialists in the study of the qurʾānic text.

It is perhaps as a consequence of the impact of revisionism that contemporary scholars of the Qurʾān so frequently focus on the *textus receptus* as a given fact and treat it as effectively lacking any tangible context whatsoever. Literary analysis of the qurʾānic corpus has flourished over the last decade; this type of study, focusing on elements such as style, rhetoric, inner-qurʾānic resonances, structure, and so forth, may justifiably be deemed meritorious in itself. But apart from the intrinsic merit of such approaches to the Qurʾān, such work seems to function to liberate scholars from having to address questions about context entirely. One's investments are simply different if concerns such as authorship and milieu are abstracted away from the basic fact of the text *qua* text as an object of analysis laid before us. Crucially, even comparative work of the sort that once nurtured

29. With characteristic precision, Bowersock actually specifies the years 560–610 (the Persian takeover in Yemen) and 632–660 (the Rashidun and the early expansion of the *ummah*) as the darkest periods in the history he charts in *The Crucible of Islam*.

hypotheses about foreign elements "influencing" the Qur'ān is now frequently conducted in an analytical setting wholly evacuated of contextual concerns. Perhaps because the sinister phantom of older reductionist and Orientalist scholarship obsessed with exposing Islam's 'debt' to Judaism and Christianity still looms large before us, even the most convincing demonstrations of the Qur'ān's probable literary intertexts and precursors are often quite painfully reticent about historical implications, rehearsing familiar tropes about the unknowability of the real sources of, or the actual mechanisms of 'influence' upon, the Qur'ān.

Most of the contributions to *Islam and Its Past* read the Qur'ān against the grain of traditional claims about Islam's origins; many of them assert hypotheses that would have been rather radical fifteen years ago, but now are increasingly commonplace and widely accepted as within the established boundaries of responsible, informed scholarly speculation. Many of them provoke complex and difficult questions about the *textus receptus*. However, few of them offer any concrete observations about the Qur'ān's revelatory context that might be extrapolated from their textual analysis. Here, it should be noted, Crone is the exception, standing out as the pioneer she always was: the whole point of her "God-fearers" article—as with many of her other late studies—is to read the textual evidence outside of the traditional framework of interpretation and then to directly infer a social and religious context from it. Most of the other contributors are markedly silent on the question of context when their work might reasonably provoke such questions; the textual developments they describe seem to take place in a milieu absent of detail, and they avoid conjecturing about how the *textus receptus* actually developed, how revisions and expansions occurred, or how we can account for the acute and subtle facility with biblical texts exhibited by the corpus. These chapters collectively testify to a compositional and redactional process far more complex than the traditional frame suggests, but—all too typical of this type of contemporary scholarship—without speculating as to the circumstances that might have made this possible.

This is not to say that Bowersock's handling of these specific types of question is much more satisfactory than that of the agnostics. Entirely aside from the specific revisionist tenets he would reject out of hand—that the *mushrikūn* were anything but straightforward Arabian pagans, or that the traditional representation of Mecca as a commercial hub was incorrect—it is hard to see how his framework would accommodate those aspects of the chapters of *Islam and Its Past* that challenge the status quo in ways that are increasingly commonplace and reflective of the current consensus. Nothing in his account seems to allow for the possibility of a more complex revelatory and redactional history for the *muṣḥaf* than that presented in the *sīrah* and related traditional sources. And again, Bowersock generally exhibits

a confidence in the traditional framework for interpretation of the Qur'ān and account of the circumstances of its revelation that is out of step with mainstream scholarly approaches today.

For example, at the end of the chapter on the Medinan period, Bowersock gives a very terse account of the emergence of the first Muslim state after the *hijrah*, asserting that the military activities of the *ummah* in this period left a direct impression on the Qur'ān, reading Sūrah 85 (specifically vv. 4–9) as a reference to the Battle of the Trench in 5/627.[30] This is another of his idiosyncratic readings of the Qur'ān, since the passage in question is sometimes interpreted as a reference to Muḥammad's people being vindicated against their oppressors (and thus as an allusion to Badr, not the Khandaq), but it is much more commonly correlated with the Ḥimyarite persecution of the Christians of Najrān. Bowersock refers to this event a number of times in his account, so it is puzzling that he opts to assign a totally different context to this passage here.[31]

As with so many other contemporary studies of their ilk, the chapters of *Islam and Its Past* cleave to a radically different conception of the origins of the qur'ānic corpus. For example, the contributions of Witztum and Neuwirth in particular seem to imagine an author or authors behind the qur'ānic corpus possessed of significant agency and ability vis-à-vis the appropriation and reimagining of biblical tradition. Neuwirth is more willing than most to designate the Qur'ān as communal property, a collective enterprise that reflects the dynamic development of a prophetic community rapidly evolving in ability and awareness as it navigates the complex religious terrain before it.[32] This dovetails with the insights yielded by Crone's inquiry, insofar as Neuwirth's schema of qur'ānic discourse evolving to "stage," "penetrate," and "eclipse" biblical tradition is conceivably reconcilable with Crone's hypothesis of an Arab community gradually acclimating to a proximate "Israelite" presence and actively assimilating its traditions. It also dovetails with Sinai's description of the growth of qur'ānic passages through secondary and tertiary additions, since one can readily imagine a dynamically evolving community having to revisit older revelations and adjust the legislations therein in keeping with changing attitudes and circumstances.

30. *The Crucible of Islam*, 112–113.

31. It is also possible that Bowersock has simply confused this passage, with its distinctive reference to the "Companions of the Trench" (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*), with the traditional accounts of the Battle of the Trench.

32. See also the introduction to her *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*: *Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014) for a current statement of her views on this point.

The underlying assumption that informs most of the chapters of *Islam and Its Past* is that careful investigation of qur'ānic evidence without the intervention of tradition may lead us to conclusions at odds with the traditional account—or, put another way, that the traditional account may not hold up in the light of conclusions an unbiased inquiry into the textual evidence might yield. But again, Bowersock is tremendously skeptical about such skepticism, especially about the feasibility of casting the Prophet's contemporaries as anything but straightforward polytheists. Admittedly, familiar as he is with such evidence as survives of the Arabian *ḥaram*s, litholatry, the cult of the goddesses al-ʿUzzā, Allāt, and Manāt, and so forth (especially as they may overlap with bodies of evidence elsewhere than the Roman East, for example the Syrian borderlands or other imperial territories), one can imagine why Bowersock is impatient with revisionist attempts to argue that this evidence is immaterial or marginal.

But it is clear that to some degree Bowersock actually misunderstands the nature of contemporary revisionist critique of the traditional sources. The point of such work is plainly *not* to suggest that Arabian polytheism did not exist at all. Much of what we believe we know about Arabian polytheism comes either from material evidence such as that which informs Bowersock's perspective or from accounts preserved in later Muslim tradition; on some level, much of what is related by the tradition must surely be accurate or at least reasonably verisimilitudinous. However, the real point of revisionist critique is to emphasize that the image of Arabian polytheism that emerges from the available evidence is in fact almost entirely absent from the Qur'ān itself, which does not describe pagan cultus, nor even trouble itself to condemn it directly. Rather, as the close readings of Hawting and others demonstrate, the criticisms levied against the *mushrikūn* in the Qur'ān quite plausibly constitute a form of intra-monotheist polemic instead. If Arabian polytheism was really ubiquitous in the Ḥijāz, including among the Quraysh—that is, in the milieu in which we generally assume the qur'ānic corpus took shape—it is startling that that corpus actually seems to register it so minimally. We can only conclude that 'idolatry' in the literal sense is prevalent in the Qur'ān if that is what the term *shirk* does in fact unambiguously mean. For almost twenty years a great number of scholars of the Qur'ān have been at least reasonably certain that this is not the case.[33]

33. The single most influential work advancing the thesis that the *mushrikūn* were likely not literal pagans—or at least that *shirk* in qur'ānic discourse may have been a term of intra-monotheist polemic—is G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Hawting's work set the agenda for much of the work that has followed over the nearly two decades since it was published, though its influence is often unacknowledged or underestimated. It was not underestimated by Crone, who cited

Bowersock's reluctance to accept this argument is especially striking because in the last chapter of his book he notes that in the context of the epigraphic program of the Dome of the Rock, the evocation of the term *mushrikūn* there must either mean Chalcedonians or Trinitarians more generally, since Christianity could readily be cast as tantamount to polytheism in Muslim polemic.[34] Why *shirk* must be figurative in the context of seventh-century Jerusalem is obvious; why it cannot likewise be so in the original qur'ānic context escapes me, especially given Bowersock's acknowledgement of the presence of Jews and Christians in the Ḥijāz in Muḥammad's time.[35]

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One might not be willing to go quite as far as Neuwirth or Sinai regarding the possibility of collective authorship behind the Qur'ān, or of a qur'ānic corpus gradually expanding due to the input of multiple redactors, but still may be inclined to recognize the complexity of the Qur'ān's literary horizons. In this case, historiographic problems still loom large, and one of two choices regarding our perception of the historical Muḥammad is possible. One can compromise on the question of the immediate source of the Qur'ān, since the traditional picture of Muḥammad and his peers can accommodate a

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Hawting's book as the direct inspiration for her later work on the Qur'ān. Bowersock acknowledges Crone's earlier work on Meccan trade but seems to have taken little of her later research into account; likewise, he cites Hawting's *The Idea of Idolatry* in one footnote but largely overlooks its most important insights.

34. As in the invocation of the phrase "though the *mushrikūn* hate it" in the inscription, putatively an allusion to either Q Tawbah 9:32 or Q Ṣaff 61:8 (given by Bowersock as 9:33 and 61:9; *The Crucible of Islam*, 187, n.13).

35. The underlying logic here seems to be that paganism is an all or nothing enterprise, without gradations. In Bowersock's view, when pagans incline toward monotheism—that is, toward recognizing the superiority of a single god—this is still polytheism, especially since many people we would unambivalently deem polytheists in antiquity appear to have subscribed to such a view. The logical consequence of this seems to be that the *mushrikūn* of the Qur'ān, presumed to be polytheist on the basis of archaeology and tradition, are not really evolving towards monotheism if and when they posit that the so-called Daughters of Allāh are intermediaries between their devotees and God. Bowersock seems to overlook (or dismiss out of hand) the possibility that for the *mushrikūn* the Daughters were not really deities but rather created beings. (I deliberately avoid the term "angel" here, as Bowersock notes that some pagan messenger deities were "angels" outside of the monotheistic context, and so the appearance of "angels" in the Jāhilī environment actually *reinforces* the idea that the *mushrikūn* are pagans; see *The Crucible of Islam*, 38ff.) Bowersock seems generally uninterested in considering the possibility that the *mushrikūn* were actually partially monotheized or biblicized Arabs as Crone imagines in her late work, e.g., her contribution to *Islam and Its Past* discussed here.

thesis of significant biblical literacy only with difficulty. Alternatively, one can compromise on the question of the prehistory of the corpus, insofar as said biblical literacy can perhaps be attributed to the sources of the constituent parts of the corpus, which then must be granted a significant history of development at the pre-revelatory (or pre-prophetic) stage, during which time the ambient biblical tradition could have been adapted, Arabized, and distilled into textual components that were then secondarily redacted into the *textus receptus*.[36]

Admittedly, while he rejects some revisionist tenets, in other respects Bowersock is not so much hostile to such conceptual possibilities as he is prone to just sidestep or defer them.[37] He is extremely direct about the larger context of Arabian integration into the larger imperial world system, and openly acknowledges Judaization and Christianization as important factors, but becomes rather vague when addressing questions such as how the Qurʾān came into being, or how the early prophetic movement related to these larger trends:

> There can be little doubt that when Muhammad was reaching maturity, the cults in central and southwestern Arabia under Persian domination were embedded in a thick context that went back at least as far as the late fourth century, and were an amalgam that was part Jewish, part Christian, and part polytheist. This was fertile ground for a charismatic prophet like Muhammad, but also for comparably charismatic figures in the Arabian hinterland not far away from Mecca.[38]

36. Proponents of a more conservative approach to the origins of the Qurʾān often caricature revisionism as founded upon the claim that the scripture emerged later than tradition holds, an argument vitiated by the assignment of dates to early witnesses to the *muṣḥaf* that locate them in the proto-Islamic period (i.e., the first century *anno hegirae*). However, such attempts to vindicate the traditional view do nothing to address the complicated background to qurʾānic discourse, which a critical scholar cannot responsibly attribute to the historical Muḥammad working in isolation. This objection is raised in a particularly lucid way by Gabriel Said Reynolds in his comments on the public debate over the significance of Alba Fedeli's dating of the Birmingham Qurʾān fragments to 568–645 CE; see "Variant Readings," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 5, 2015.

37. In the prologue, Bowersock makes the peculiar claim that he is not advancing an alternative account of Islam's emergence, only describing "the chaotic environment that made Islam possible" (*The Crucible of Islam*, 9). It is unclear, at least to this reviewer, what the value of such a description is except in order to contextualize the origins of Islam—that is, exactly to advance some account of its emergence.

38. *The Crucible of Islam*, 58.

The particulars of this "embedding," how this "amalgam" originated, remain unspecified. The larger context is surely significant, but Islam seems to have just *happened* within it. Inroads were made by Jews and Christians and presumably had an impact on the native Arabs of the peninsula, but for Bowersock, questions such as how exactly new ideas percolated throughout Arabia (and in what form), what constituted the Judaism and Christianity to which Muḥammad (as author of the Qur'ān, as insinuated by Bowersock in various places) was exposed, how exactly new prophets were inspired, and so forth remain seemingly unanswerable.[39]

The tension between Bowersock's emphasis on the circumambient political and social conditions in which the proto-Islamic movement arose and his reluctance to engage in deeper speculation about the origins of the qur'ānic corpus recurs throughout the book, but is especially acute in Chapter 5, where he lays particular emphasis on the close relationship between Ethiopia and Arabia from antiquity up to and through Muḥammad's day. The implication of this close relationship, we may infer, is that the Axumite version of the characteristic late antique fusion of religious and political claims into imperial ideology inspired the Prophet's model for what the *ummah* should be, or would become. But it is remarkable that Bowersock completely overlooks (or omits) the small but significant body of scholarship on the Qur'ān that explores the possible impact not just of Ge'ez terminology but whole scriptural complexes drawn from Ethiopic biblical tradition on qur'ānic discourse.[40] This is a frontier in Qur'ānic Studies that is wide open for exploration, and Bowersock's narrative certainly encourages more investigation of an Ethiopian matrix for early Islam. But his lack of interest in this area of research in *The Crucible of Islam* is rather perplexing.

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In conclusion, it hardly seems necessary to point out that much work remains to be done in seeking to bring disparate approaches to the pre-Islamic milieu

39. This posture of agnosticism is perhaps deliberate, reflecting Bowersock's aforementioned declaration that he would avoid advancing a new account of the origins of Islam, but his refusal to engage questions that seem to lie at the heart of his project creates a strange and recurrent tension throughout the book.

40. Cf., e.g.: Manfred Kropp, "Beyond Single Words: *Mā'ida – Shayṭān – jibt* and *ṭaghūt*. Mechanisms of Transmission into the Ethiopic (Gəʿəz) Bible and the Qur'ānic Text," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 204–216; Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Qur'ān's *Mā'ida* Passage and the Wanderings of the Israelites," in Carlos A. Segovia & Basil Lourié (eds.), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam in Memory of John Wansbrough* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 91–108.

and the origins of the Qur'ān and Islam together. Bowersock's account provides at least a baseline narrative for scholars and students investigating the formative period of Islam. His accessible and provocative treatment of that period is in some ways too conservative in its approach to complex questions pertaining to the origins of the Qur'ān. But he is indisputably well informed about these questions, and his work is exceptional among similar surveys in successfully synthesizing the Islamic foundation narrative with current scholarly thinking about developments in the larger late antique environment, especially in pre-Islamic South Arabia. In turn, Bakhos and Cook's *Islam and Its Past* is a highly worthwhile collection of very useful studies representative of significant strands of thought in the contemporary critical study of the Qur'ān and early Islam. As stated before, the volume's main shortcoming is the lack of diversity in approaches to the proto-Islamic period featured therein, with a conspicuous paucity of material on epigraphy, archaeology, paleography, and manuscripts. This omission is especially striking given the glaring disjunction in approaches exhibited in these two works, reflecting a chronic disparity in the field between the methods and results of more positivist historical accounts like Bowersock's on the one hand—directly informed by consideration of material evidence—and those of contemporary textual studies on the Qur'ān like those in *Islam and Its Past* on the other—provoking rather different questions about the origins of Islam, yet often veering away from drawing direct and explicit historical conclusions from the more radical implications of textual analysis.

So as not to end on a negative note, I should also acknowledge the ways in which Bowersock's account and the studies in *Islam and Its Past* are compatible, their points of agreement and conjunction possibly pointing the way forward for productive research in the future. For example, Bowersock's narrative emphasizes Islam's emergence in a context of (for lack of a better word) globalization, with the Prophet's career and the formation of the *ummah* and the jihad state under the Rashidun and the Umayyads resulting from the increasing integration of Arabian society into what we would today call international affairs. Although Bowersock shies away from considering such processes closely, one is struck by the fact that the dynamic of cultural and religious adaptation and acculturation that underlies (e.g.) Crone's "God-fearer" model for the Arabian background of the Qur'ān would be a natural consequence of the larger political and social changes that Bowersock focuses on. Crone's positing of a significant "Israelite" presence in the Ḥijāz (not just Medina but Mecca as well), entailing both the construction of places of worship and the dissemination of scripture in various forms and registers, is hardly outlandish in light of the movement of people and ideas into various parts of the peninsula over the centuries—migration and colonization being two obvious avenues of

religious and cultural change. Bowersock openly acknowledges as much, though he would likely balk at Crone's implication that there might have been synagogues in Mecca, or that Christianity was widespread in the Ḥijāz, just as he openly opposes the interpretation of the qur'ānic *mushrikūn* as anything but pagans pure and simple.

Despite their differences, the thread that runs through both Bowersock and Crone's work is the idea that the transformative processes of the period involved the gradual acclimation and incorporation of Arabian society into the larger late antique milieu. Textual studies that focus on qur'ānic discourse's complex imbrication with biblical tradition may likewise be reconciled with Bowersock's account, even though they may shy from explicit conjectures about the social and demographic context like Crone's and remain agnostic on specifically historical questions. Among the studies in *Islam and Its Past*, the chapters of Neuwirth and Witztum seem particularly compatible with Bowersock's portrayal of the environment, especially Neuwirth, given that her method is to read the qur'ānic corpus diachronically as a record of the prophetic community's progress across stages of exposure, assimilation, and finally appropriation of the scriptural culture of the Ahl al-Kitāb. Such studies of the Qur'ān's relationship to the biblical tradition, with their decisive shift from themes of dependency and borrowing to those of dialectical engagement and agency, dovetail well with Bowersock's representation of the milieu, in which gradual integration and complex interactions are the dominant historiographic keys.[41]

I should also note in this connection one of the most striking features of many of the contributions to *Islam and Its Past*. Again, some of the conclusions—or at least implications—of many of the volume's chapters would be difficult to reconcile with the orthodox account of the revelation and collection of the Qur'ān, an account Bowersock accepts in virtually all details. However, one also detects in the collection a certain impulse towards rapprochement with Muslim tradition manifest in a variety of ways, which is perhaps indicative of an increasingly prevalent tendency in the field of Qur'ānic Studies as a whole—a swinging of the pendulum back from an extreme rejection of tradition towards a sanguine embrace of more conventional ideas, or at least some synthesis with them, balancing revisionist insights with a more constructive positivist agenda.

41. Gajda's short contribution to *Islam and Its Past* may be read as supporting this approach as well: her emphasis on gradualism in Ḥimyar's adjustment to Judaism or Israelite-style monotheism, even as a deliberate policy under a centralizing state, implies that biblical and Jewish cultural material was not only disseminated in this arena, but slowly and imperfectly assimilated to native strains of Arab culture—exactly the sort of process Crone describes among her "God-fearing" Arabs in the Ḥijāz.

Bowersock's account hearkens back deliberately to Watt's, which quite famously (or infamously) was predicated on an enthusiastic embrace of traditional sources as fundamentally trustworthy. Likewise, Neuwirth has long championed the necessity of accepting the traditional chronology of qurʾānic revelation, building on the edifice established in Western scholarship by Nöldeke and his successors, which was itself based on the Muslim interpretive paradigm. Her diachronic charting of the stages of qurʾānic engagement with biblical tradition shows how traditional chronology is still serviceable—perhaps even indispensable—as a heuristic framework enabling serious analysis of the development of the prophetic community.

Sinai's work here and elsewhere makes an analogous commitment to chronology, however provisionally, and his chapter models a kind of redaction criticism of the stratigraphy of the qurʾānic *sūrah* as a literary form. Notably, as mentioned above, in the second of his two case studies (Q 9:1–11), his preferred interpretation of the textual growth of the verses making up this difficult pericope vindicates the overarching conception of the development of policy pertaining to the treatment of the *mushrikūn* adumbrated in classical Muslim sources. This complements an explicit methodological statement Sinai makes early on, noting that "many Muslim scholars were expert readers of their scripture who possessed abundant philological acumen, interpretive creativity, literary sensitivity, and an intimate familiarity with the Qurʾanic corpus as a whole."[42]

Similarly, in the conclusion to his chapter, Witztum underlines the importance of drawing on disparate bodies of evidence for interpretation—"combining lower criticism, contextual readings, attention to pre-Islamic lore, and a consideration of what we know, or at least think we know, of the Prophet's life."[43] That is, data drawn from philological, inner-qurʾānic, and comparative analysis complements and in some way corroborates aspects of the traditional account of the circumstances of revelation, at least in broad terms. Hawting's conclusions in his chapter are quite different in tone and implication, but he likewise signals the inevitability of navigating the terrain of Islamic origins in partnership with the tradition. As much as we might want to see Muḥammad's career in a particular phenomenological or historical light, we cannot deviate at will from what the traditional sources tell us because they very often provide our only vantage point onto the period. Those sources can only tell us so much, and contravening them simply for the sake of advancing a

42. Nicolai Sinai, "Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion," in Bakhos and Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past*, 105.

43. Joseph Witztum, "'O Believers, Be Not as Those Who Hurt Moses,'" in Bakhos and Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past*, 135.

revisionist hypothesis, however appealing, is methodologically questionable—and ultimately counterproductive if such work is to appear credible.

This brings us back full circle to the observations of Stewart, whose chapter introduced so many of the themes we have explored here. He also notes the importance of engaging with the Muslim scholarly tradition on the Qurʾān, especially pertaining to the study of qurʾānic language and rhetoric. Clearly, we ignore the insights of the many centuries of Muslim scholarly inquiry into qurʾānic and classical Arabic at our peril; but arguably, this applies to *sīrah* and *tafsīr* as well. While we cannot and should not go back to an era in scholarship when the doctrinal and ideological impulses behind classical (and medieval, and modern) Muslim interpretation went uninterrogated and so the traditional meanings ascribed to the Qurʾān were uncritically accepted, it is obvious that there remains much of value in Muslim exegesis for scholars to consider. The challenge for contemporary (and future) scholars is to continue this rapprochement with tradition, bridging the gap between the modern critical study of the Qurʾān and the resources offered to us by the traditional qurʾānic sciences.

This effort must go hand-in-hand with a greater attempt at integrating the study of text and context. Literary and philological methods of analysis will likely always enjoy pride of place in Western approaches to the Qurʾān, but these must be combined with the study of the *muṣḥaf* as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Qurʾān, which requires the ongoing development of the disciplines of paleography and manuscript studies. Further, these endeavors cannot be separated from the attempt to locate the Qurʾān and its development in the larger political, social, religious, and economic histories of the late antique world; nor, for that matter, can they be divorced from ongoing critical inquiry into what can be known about the life of the Prophet and the immediate circumstances of the revelation of the Qurʾān. The task that lies before contemporary scholars is obviously an enormous undertaking, but—as this essay has hopefully demonstrated—enormous opportunities await scholars as well. One may readily predict that the field of Qurʾānic Studies will continue to flourish, provided that scholars embrace the task of adopting a more balanced or holistic approach to the scripture and bring the same level of energy that has propelled the vital growth of the field over the last decade to this new agenda.

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ISSN 2474-8390 (print)
ISSN 2474-8420 (online)

Printed in the United States of American on acid-free paper

Volume 2 (2017)

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ISBN 978-1-937040-72-7