

Article

Speech Genres and Interpretation of the Qur'an

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Abstract: This essay provides an overview of the investigation of genres in Qur'anic studies to date and argues for the utility of the theory of speech genres for the interpretation of the Qur'an generally. Drawing on this approach, it addresses several Qur'anic passages whose interpretation has been a matter of debate. Attention to the generic conventions of the various types of speech that are contained in Islam's sacred text may help resolve a number of long-standing and current interpretive debates.

Keywords: Qur'an; genre; speech genres; form criticism

1. Genres in Qur'anic Research

“At present, historical Western research is only breathing with one lung, so to speak. The second lung, the Arabicity and poeticity of the Qur'an, has not yet been utilized.” (Neuwirth 2019, p. 37)

The Western tradition of Qur'anic studies has produced numerous works on the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, the chronological layers of the Qur'an, the history of the redaction and transmission of the text, the structure of the Qur'an's surahs, Qur'anic themes and concepts, women and gender in the Qur'an, the foreign vocabulary of the Qur'an, and the connections between the Qur'an and Biblical traditions, both Jewish and Christian. However, it must be admitted they have left large areas of investigation relatively unplumbed, namely, those that depend most directly on knowledge of the vast repertoire of the Arabic language, including its varieties, forms, nuances, and usages, and on sensitivity to the Qur'an's poetic and rhetorical features. Within this large purview, any number of specific areas might be singled out as potential foci for future research. The effects of rhyme and rhythm, which are crucial for the Qur'an, have been to a large extent ignored in Western scholarship, after a few early forays.¹ Several recent studies have broached the topic of Qur'an's poetic nature and its relationship to Arabic poetic discourse generally.² Rhetoric, similarly fundamental for the analysis of the Qur'anic text, treated in a large body of sophisticated scholarship in the Islamic tradition, has also been regularly ignored in Western scholarship.³ Another potential focus of investigation is that of the various genres that make up the Qur'anic text. These may be investigated through a combination of careful attention to the text of the Qur'an and to written and oral genres in various forms of Arabic and other languages, using the tools of form criticism and speech genre theory. The following remarks provide a brief introduction to speech genres and their potential utility in analyses of the Qur'an and discuss several Qur'anic passages in which attention to generic conventions helps arrive at an interpretation.

When confronted with a puzzling term or turn of phrase in the Qur'an, the would-be interpreter stands before several possible options. Within a religious tradition, the first and often dominant option is the appeal to religious authority or to the cumulative wisdom of extant commentary. Islamic tradition boasts a large and variegated literature of commentary on the Qur'an, both in Qur'anic exegeses and in related works such as those devoted to the life of the Prophet, occasions of revelation, variant readings, grammar, rhetoric, lexicon, and so on. This body of material has tended to be accepted as authoritative



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by believers or rejected as suspect by modern Western scholars on the grounds that it has been thoroughly tainted by invention and the back-projection of later theological doctrines. Nevertheless, even from the point of view of scholars who are eschewing a doctrinal approach, the apparatus of pre-modern Muslim scholarship around the Qur'an offers a great deal of valuable information and many relevant analyses and insights. At the same time, it is undeniable that in a number of cases, the evidence suggests that authors of extant commentaries often misunderstood the text or missed what is evidently the most convincing interpretation, often for doctrinal reasons. The truth is that the dichotomy is not so stark. The Muslim exegetes of the eighth, ninth, and later centuries were engaging in many of the same interpretive operations that Germans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were attempting, even if they often couched their opinions in different language and justified them by citing a different set of authorities.

If one is wary of being unduly influenced by orthodox interpretations and doctrinal understandings, perhaps the first option beyond the appeal to authority or tradition is to undertake a concordance study. This involves the examination of all instances of a particular term in the complete corpus and the use of clues in the immediate contexts of the various instances of the term in order to throw light on its meaning. The fewer the number of instances, the more difficult the use of context may become. It is clear, for example, that the available definitions of many of the Qur'an's hapax legomena in the tradition are based primarily on guesswork from the context of the single verses in which they occur, and in this, modern Western scholars are in the same situation as their Muslim counterparts in the ninth century. Another potential pitfall is that many words have distinct senses, sometimes quite distant from each other. Concordance studies are inherently biased toward arriving at single, harmonizing definitions that fit all occurrences of the term in question, glossing over what might be quite disparate meanings. The term *kitāb*, the ordinary word for "book" in Arabic, clearly means "letter" in Surat al-Naml, where it is used to refer to Solomon's official letter to the Queen of Sheba (27:28–31). In another context, it refers to the contract for a debt or loan (2:282–83). In others, it refers to a record of one's sins and good deeds (e.g., 69:19). In yet others, it refers to the Qur'an, to scripture generally, and to the Bible in particular. Providing a single harmonizing definition such as a written document would not be entirely wrong, but it would certainly be occluding important aspects of the term's various meanings. Many Western studies of the Qur'an have adopted the method of a concordance study, including Daniel A. Madigan's *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Madigan 2001), which looks at all the instances of the term *kitāb* and other related terms in the text. There are many other examples.

A second strategy is the resort to cognates. For example, the term *al-Furqān* (2:53, 185; 3:4; 8:41; 21:48; 25:1) has puzzled commentators on the Qur'an. Many investigators have associated it with the cognates *farq* "difference" or *farrāqa* "to distinguish", and on that basis have suggested that *al-Furqān* is related in meaning to distinction or discrimination. Pickthall therefore translated the term as "the Criterion" and supplied the explanatory extension "that distinguishes right from wrong".

A third strategy is the resort to foreign etymology. Some scholars have interpreted the term *al-Furqān* as a reflex of the Aramaic *purqānā*, meaning "deliverance" or Hebrew *peraḳim* "sections of scripture" (Jeffery 2007, pp. 225–29).

A fourth strategy is the resort to textual variants or textual emendation. Fred Donner has proposed that *al-Furqān* derives from Aramaic/Syriac *purqānā* "deliverance", in cases in which *al-Furqān* is associated with victory in battle, but from Syriac *puqdānā* "commandment" in cases in which *al-Furqān* is associated with revelation, as in 25:1 (Donner 2007).

A fifth strategy is the approach discussed here: determining the genre to which the text under examination belongs and then using the conventions of that genre to help resolve the interpretive problem. Attention to genre can provide a path toward an interpretation when other methods prove insufficient, providing a clearer interpretation, corroborating an interpretation supported by other concomitant evidence, or ruling out proposed in-

terpretations as improbable. Of course, this strategy does not exist in isolation; it may be combined with other strategies in accord with the demands of the particular passage addressed and applied along with other standard techniques of philology. The present essay focuses on the use of genre as a hermeneutical tool especially since it has often been ignored or underestimated in Qur'anic studies despite its utility.

2. Investigating Qur'anic Genres

The investigation of genres is one of the most promising avenues of contemporary Qur'anic research. Traditional Muslim scholarship included some focused study of specific genres within the Qur'an, despite the fact that other modes of analysis, such as grammatical, lexical, rhetorical, legal, theological, or mystical, predominated overall. According to Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), one interpretation of the well-known *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muḥammad that the Qur'ān was revealed *‘alā sab‘ati aḥruf* “according to seven letters”, or “in seven ways” is that it refers to types of texts included in the Qur'an. While his own view was that the “seven letters” have to do with linguistic and formal variants, other scholars understood that the “seven letters” referred to seven categories of text: command (*amr*), prohibition (*nahy* or *zajr*), promise (*wa‘d* or *targhīb*), threat (*wa‘d* or *tarhīb*), debate (*jadāl*), narrative (*qāṣaṣ*), and parable (*mathal*).⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350) showed a great deal of interest in Qur'anic genres, having authored *Amthāl al-Qur'ān*, on Qur'anic parables, and *al-Tibyān fī aymān al-Qur'ān*, on Qur'anic oaths (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 1981, 2008). At least the last three categories, *jadāl*, *qāṣaṣ*, and *mathal*, designate categories that are arguably genres. The genre of the *mathal* in particular attracted much attention in the Islamic tradition. Medieval works devoted to *Amthāl al-Qur'ān* were written by Muḥammad b. al-Junayd al-Qawārīrī (d. 298/910), Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. ‘Arafah, known as Niṭawayh (d. 323/935), and Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Iskāfī (d. 352/963) (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014, vol. 1, pp. 98, 665). The well-known Shāfi‘ī jurist Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī (d. 463/1072) wrote another such work, *Kitāb al-Amthāl al-Qur'āniyyah*. Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) in *al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur'ān* and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur'ān* both devote independent chapters to the genre of the *mathal*.⁵ Traditional discussions of *faḍā‘ il al-Qur'ān* “the merits of the Qur'an”, represented in the canonical hadith collections and in independent books and treatises, focused to a significant extent on the genre of prayer (*du‘ā*) in the Qur'an. For example, instructions to recite *khawātim al-suwar* “the conclusions of the surahs” or especially the end of Sūrat al-Baqarah for spiritual or worldly benefit are based on recognition that many surahs end with texts that belong to the genre of prayers. Al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) reports that reading the last two verses from Sūrat al-Baqarah will suffice the believer for the night.⁶ This claim is most likely due to the fact that the final verse includes the following prayer:

rabbānā lā tu‘akhidhnā in nasīnā aw akhta‘nā. rabbānā wa-lā taḥmil ‘alaynā iṣran kamā ḥamaltahu ‘alā lladhīna min qablinā. rabbānā wa-lā tuḥammilnā mā lā ṭāqata lanā bihi wa-fu‘annā wa-ghfir lanā wa-rḥamnā anta mawlānā fa-nṣurnā ‘alā l-qawmi l-kāfirīn

Our Lord! Do not take us to task if we forget or make mistakes. Our Lord! Lay not upon us a burden like that which You laid upon those before us. Our Lord! Do not burden us with more than we have strength to bear, and pardon us, forgive us, and have mercy on us. You are our Protector, so make us victorious over the disbelieving people. (2:286)

In *Faḍā‘ il al-Qur'ān*, Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 224/838) reports the words of the Prophet, “God concluded Sūrat al-Baqarah with two verses that he gave me from His treasure chest at the foot of the Throne. So, learn them and teach them to your children and your women, for they are [at the same time] Qur'an, worship (*ṣalāt*), and prayer (*du‘ā*)” (al-Qāsim b. Sallām 1995, vol. 2, pp. 38–39). These are merely a few indications among many. A substantial survey of numerous types of works would be necessary to discover the true extent of medieval philologists' engagement with genres in the Qur'an.

Genres have not been entirely ignored in the history of Western Qur'anic studies. Many works in the field discuss particular genres or types of text in passing, but only a few scholars have focused to a significant extent on the types of texts that the Qur'an contains. Richard Bell notes several types of text in his *Introduction to the Qur'an*, but does not designate them as genres, discussing them under the rubric of "The Structure and Style of the Qur'ān" (Bell 1953, pp. 67–81). Neal Robinson and Angelika Neuwirth include many insights on form and genre in their general works on the Qur'an (Robinson 1996; Neuwirth 1981, 2010). Certain individual forms have been investigated with some intensity, such as the punishment stories of the Qur'an, which have been addressed ever since the publications of Aloys Sprenger (1813–1893) in the mid-nineteenth century until the present day. They are the focus of a substantial chapter by Josef Horowitz (1874–1931) and a book by David Marshall, not to mention dozens of journal articles and other studies.⁷ The *mathal*—generally termed parable, though this is only an approximate label, since the *mathal* may designate a proverb, similitude, example, and so on—has also been investigated by many scholars since the late nineteenth century.⁸ Carl Anton Baumstark (1872–1948) wrote a study of Jewish and Christian prayer-forms in the Qur'an (Baumstark 1927), and S.D. Goitein (1900–1925) also wrote on prayer in the Qur'an (Goitein 1923). The Qur'an's oracular oaths have been treated in a number of studies.⁹ These are the main genres that have been treated to a significant extent to date in Western Qur'anic studies.

Among the earlier scholars who showed a sustained interest in genres is Hartwig Hirschfeld, who, in his 1902 work *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, discusses a number of types of texts designated as belonging to the Meccan or Medinan periods. Regarding the Meccan period, he enumerates the following textual categories: (1) the first proclamation, (2) confirmatory revelations, (3) declamatory revelations, (4) narrative revelations, (5) descriptive revelations, (6) legislative revelations, and (7) the parable. Regarding the Medinan period, he discusses the following categories: (1) political speeches and (2) revelations regarding Muhammad's domestic affairs. He also discusses interpolations and "initials", that is, the discrete letters that appear at the beginnings of 29 *sūrah*s in the Qur'an. Parables certainly constitute a genre, but of Hirschfeld's other categories such as narrative, descriptive, and legal revelations refer to larger categories that are not genres per se but rather to categories of content.

In his *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, Richard Bell discusses a number of types of text that appear in the Qur'an under the rubric of style. These categories are slogans, asseverative passages, "when"-passages, dramatic scenes, narratives and parables, similes, and metaphors (Bell 1953, pp. 74–81). While similes and metaphors are rhetorical figures and not genres, and dramatic scenes may occur in a number of disparate genres, Bell's asseverative passages represent a particular type of oracle introduced by cryptic oaths, and his "when"-passages are omens. Slogans and parables may also be recognized as genres, as may narratives, perhaps, though narrative is a broad category. In his 2006 discussion of Qur'anic language, Mustansir Mir distinguished five types of text in the Qur'an: narrative, poetic, hortative, hymnal, and legal (Mir 2006). In my view, these are not properly genres but supra-generic categories.

In recent years, a "Register of Text-types" in the Qur'an was prepared by the Corpus Coranicum project.¹⁰ It is admittedly preliminary, but it attempts to be comprehensive. It is based on careful analysis of the Qur'anic text as well as use of secondary literature on the Qur'an in German and English, especially the works of Angelika Neuwirth and Neal Robinson, and it represents the best available list to date. Even so, it is not free of problems and shortcomings. Some of the labels used in this list designate features having to do with outward form but not with genre. Thus, one of the text-types is *Zusätze* "Additions". Another is "*idhā* series"—that is, what Bell calls "'when'-passages" (Bell 1953, pp. 76–77). Both terms describe particular formal features of the text but do not properly describe the genres in which they appear. The labels for the most part do not derive from Qur'anic language itself but rather have been applied to the text on the basis of an analysis that has

drawn neither on Arabic literary traditions nor on knowledge of Arabic speech forms. The register shows evidence of the comparative influence of Biblical studies scholarship.

3. Form Criticism

The genealogy of the programmatic investigation of genres in Biblical studies may be traced back to the great investigators of folklore in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Folklorists investigated proverbs, fables, fairytales, nursery rhymes, and other forms in an effort to perform linguistic archaeology of the European national languages and to discover the national ethos. One of the chief theorists of this was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who used the term *Volksgeist* “the spirit of the people” and influenced the Brothers Grimm and many other scholars of language, folklore, and literature. Both Herder and Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) viewed the Hebrew Bible to some extent as the embodiment of the folkloric ethos of the ancient nation of Israel. Gunkel founded Biblical form criticism, in part by drawing on the methods and results of the folklorists and applying them to the Bible, using the method of *Gattungsforschung* “the investigation of genres” to interpret the books of the Bible, including especially the Book of Genesis and the Book of Psalms. He argued that the psalms were not a hopeless jumble of disparate pieces, nor had they been composed for a unitary purpose; rather, the Book of Psalms contained poems that belonged to several distinct genres, or *Gattungen*, that differed in form and content, served different purposes, and were originally performed on different sorts of occasions. His approach involved identifying the genres to which particular texts belonged, determining the conventions of the genres in question, and using those understandings of conventions to interpret the individual texts. Form criticism and its offspring, *Formgeschichte* (“form history”—though in English, this has usually been termed “form criticism” *tout court*, blurring the distinction between the two), became highly popular modes of Biblical criticism that were adopted by thousands of studies in that field.

Some earlier writers on Qur’anic studies were aware of Biblical form criticism, and it informed the work of scholars who worked in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century and who investigated individual Qur’anic genres, including Horowitz, Goitein, and others. *Formgeschichte*, especially as represented in the work of Martin Dibelius (1883–1947) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), focused on the use of form criticism as a tool to reveal the historical layers and editorial joins of texts presented in the canonical gospels. Their mode of scholarship influenced two prominent figures in the history of Qur’anic studies, Richard Bell (1876–1952) and John Wansbrough (1928–2002). A full understanding of their particular uses of form criticism has yet to be reached.¹¹

A number of studies have adopted a form-critical approach in the analysis of particular Qur’anic surahs and passages. Hannelies Koloska produced a detailed analysis of Sūrat al-Kahf (Q 18) that pays special attention to the genres (*Gattungen*) and forms of speech (*Redeformen*) that make up the text, including narratives, parables, polemics, and eschatological or apocalyptic passages (Koloska 2015). In a detailed and somewhat more skeptical analysis of the same surah, Marianna Klar has drawn attention to the difficulty of identifying the formal sections of the surah and of assigning them to specific genres. Such identification is rendered more difficult by the fact that the field currently lacks an accurate catalogue of Qur’anic genres, an important desideratum (Klar 2016).¹²

The 2018 work of Karim Samji, *The Qur’ān: A Form-Critical History*, represents a major leap forward with regard to the investigation of genres in the Qur’an. It undertakes a substantial overview of the genres of the Qur’an, applying the methods and approaches of Biblical form criticism to the text. Samji treats five “genres” in his work, each in an individual chapter: prayer, liturgy, wisdom, narrative, and proclamation (Samji 2018). Each chapter introduces the genre in question and presents formulae associated with it, particularly introductory formulae. Each then discusses the “setting” of the genre, referring to one of the major terms of art of the Biblical form-critics, *Sitz im Leben* (“setting in life”), that is, the general social situation or the everyday context in which texts of the genre in question were typically performed. This is followed by treatment of the “forms” associated

with the genre, generally sub-categories of the larger genre. The book is an important contribution to Qur'anic studies, providing an excellent and insightful application of the results of Biblical form criticism to Qur'anic material and a useful synthesis of the scattered relevant scholarship in Qur'anic studies on individual forms.

Samji follows closely many of the methods and conventions of Biblical form-critical scholarship. He uses the term "genre" in this work to refer to a large category, so that the total number of "genres" is quite small, only five. Such a usage is common in Biblical form criticism. These large categories might better be called supra-generic modes rather than genres. For example, "wisdom" is regularly termed a genre in Biblical form criticism, when it is an over-arching category that includes many different and distinct genres, such as proverbs, aphorisms, parables, fables, dialogues, debates, didactic poems, testaments, and esoteric treatises. Many form-critics term law a genre, but a compendium of law differs in genre from a legal *responsum*, a judge's verdict, or a royal decree. One sees a similar use of the term genre to describe large supra-generic categories in Aristotelian poetics, in which "poetry" is presented as a genre, or in the literary criticism of Northrop Frye, for whom "fiction" and "drama" are genres. Some form critical studies adopt the term "form" to refer to sub-categories of the larger "genres", and Samji follows this convention. He also shows an awareness that his work captures major genres in the Qur'an but does not capture all of the forms or sub-genres. In my view, however, "form" as a technical term and "genre" should be essentially synonymous, for form in this mode of interpretation does not refer merely to structure but rather to types of speech or literature that have recognizable conventions, and they both ought to refer to specific genres, such as the curse, the parable, or the fable, and not to larger, supra-generic categories that include many distinct genres with distinct generic conventions.

In his focus on introductory formulas, Samji also follows Biblical form critics closely. They were particularly concerned with introductory and concluding formulas, because identifying them allowed investigators to lift or separate out the passages under consideration from their surrounding texts in the books of the Bible. Identifying such formulas is undoubtedly an important step for the analysis of Qur'anic forms, for the same reason. However, introductory formulas are only one facet of the conventions that constitute a genre, and, in many cases, Samji's work could have said more about the other formal features, themes, and rhetoric involved in particular genres.

From the perspective of form-critical studies of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, two broad categories appear to be missing from Samji's list of five, and these are law and apocalyptic. He is certainly aware that legal and apocalyptic texts exist in the Qur'an, but he generally presents them under the category of proclamation. Earlier scholarship on the presentation of law in the Qur'an include studies by Rivlin (1934) and Goitein (1960). More recent studies include works by Mir (1985), Gunther (2007), and Lowry (2007, 2017, forthcoming). Lowry's studies in particular pay attention to the literary forms within which the Qur'an presents legal material. Works that address apocalyptic forms in the Qur'an include studies by Casanova (1911–1913), Brown (1983–1984), Miquel (1992), Cuypers (2014), and Lawson (2017). Much additional work needs to be done in both areas, which deserve recognition as major categories of texts in the Qur'an.

Focus on a small number of large genres or supra-generic categories inevitably leads to the omission of focused analysis of a large number of distinct genres. Some of these are short genres like those that Andre Jolles terms "simple forms": riddles, sayings, fables, proverbs, and so on (Jolles 1930). If they appear at all in Samji's book, they do so as sub-categories under a larger "genre", and the success of their treatment is mixed here. Thus, for example, Samji astutely observes that the Arabic term *mathal* does not refer to one form, but rather to several, encompassing similitudes, parables, paradigms, and exempla. In contrast, the common genre of greetings does not find any place in Samji's taxonomy, though greetings arguably play a significant role in the Qur'anic text. Samji places the punishment stories, a Qur'anic genre that has received considerable scholarly attention to date, under the large category of "narrative", but it occurs so frequently in the sacred text

and is so fundamental to Qur'anic discourse overall that it merits prominent and separate treatment. Samji's work has no larger category of "oracular statements", which I would argue is a fundamental category in the Qur'an that includes a number of specific genres, though one could argue that it overlaps with the apocalyptic. Within that category, oracles preceded by a series of oracular oaths merit special attention as a distinct genre.

4. The Study of Speech Genres

A fruitful approach that promises to supplement form criticism and address some of its shortcomings is that of speech genres. This field may be said to have been inaugurated by the 1953 article of Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), "The Problem of Speech Genres" (Bakhtin 1986). Form criticism and the study of speech genres are historically linked. Biblical form criticism influenced the Russian formalists, who applied some of the same interpretive tools to secular literature, especially to poetry. Bakhtin applied the same tools to the novel. Just as the form critics viewed the Bible as a complex text made up of smaller, simpler forms, Bakhtin viewed the novel as a complex genre made up of smaller, simpler genres, such as greetings, polite exchanges, conversations, and so on.

Bakhtin's main insight was that natural speech occurs in genres that have conventions parallel to those traditionally associated with literary genres. These genres have regularly been ignored in the study of language. Linguistic analysis has often focused on the level of the word, as in the fields of lexicography, etymology, and semantics, or on the level of the sentence, as in the fields of grammar, syntax, and Saussurian linguistics. The grammatical sentence is the central focus of nearly all language textbooks and of more recent linguistic approaches, such as transformational grammar. The science of rhetoric focused on rhetorical figures such as metaphor, simile, apostrophe, personification, chiasmus, and others. Genres, however, such as greetings, oaths, blessings, curses, jokes, apologies, complaints, and so on, do not naturally belong to any of these levels, and so have fallen between the cracks. Literary critical studies tended to focus only on literary genres such as tragedies, sonnets, or epic poetry. Certain genres such as those of the proverb and the nursery-rhyme were addressed by specialists in folklore, but most were ignored by other scholars of language and literature, and this continues to be the case. To judge the extent to which this is so, one has merely to try to find out from a pile of foreign language textbooks the proper way to complain, scold, berate, whine, lament, or cajole properly in French or Spanish. The mission is doomed to failure because foreign language textbooks most often deal early on with the genres of greeting, thanking, and introducing oneself, and then move on to the *passé composé* and the *subjonctif*.

Bakhtin argued that the fundamental unit of analysis for the study of speech genres was the utterance. The utterance is defined as the speech produced in one turn of a conversational exchange. It does not adhere to the language teacher's *de rigueur* complete sentence, for it may be as short as a single word or as long as a lecture. This is the actual unit of speech as used in society, and natural discourse is made up of combinations of these units. Analysis of the features of utterances leads one to understand the particular genres to which they belong and the conventions to which they adhere. Unfortunately, Bakhtin observed, we not only lack a comprehensive list of genres, we even lack the basis for construction of such a list: "No list of oral speech genres yet exists, or even a principle on which such a list might be based" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 80).

The study of speech genres coalesced historically with another strand of investigation pursued by North American linguistic anthropologists and folklorists such as Dell Hymes (1927–2009) and John J. Gumperz (1922–2013) in a field termed, alternatively, sociolinguistics, the ethnography of speech, or the ethnography of speaking. They focused on the analysis of speech performances of various kinds in many languages, from American Indian languages to Spanish and English. This work has been carried on more recently by such scholars as Gary H. Gossen, Joel Sherzer, Charles L. Briggs, and Richard Baumann.¹³ The key aspects stressed by these investigators are that speech occurs in *genres*; that these genres are deployed by particular speakers in *performances*; and that what enables speakers

to perform these genres is not simply acquisition of the grammar of the language, as grammarians and linguists have often assumed, but *competence* in specific genres. This approach is eminently sensible, explaining, among many other readily observable phenomena, the fact that speakers who are perfectly fluent in a language—including their native language—and know its grammar thoroughly may be inept at particular genres such as telling jokes, bargaining, or gossip. Furthermore, both the general genres and the particular performances form an integral part of culture, and both are susceptible to analysis.

The works of these scholars demonstrate that genres of speech have conventions as variegated and complex as those of literary genres. Attention to wide varieties of speech acts in many languages and cultures allowed them to arrive at more sophisticated rubrics for the analysis of human speech than had been used by the form critics. For example, Dell Hymes gives the following account of “components of speech”:

1. Message form;
2. Message content;
3. Setting;
4. Scene = “psychological setting”;
5. Speaker or sender;
6. Addressor;
7. Hearer, or receiver, or audience;
8. Addressee;
9. Purposes—outcomes;
10. Purposes—goals;
11. Key (tone, manner, or spirit);
12. Channels (media of communication);
13. Forms of speech (languages, dialects, code, register);
14. Norms of interaction;
15. Norms of interpretation;
16. Genres.¹⁴

All of these elements are worth keeping in mind when analyzing historical texts, including sacred texts such as the Bible and the Qur’an, even though many will remain opaque because the original performances are not accessible, unlike the performances of contemporary speech genres. Such historical genres are always mediated through a literary medium. Moderns only know of the Delphic oracles through written records of Delphic oracles, and though the recorded versions are somehow related to the original performances, they have gone through a process of filtering and possibly, distortion—so that certain features of the original performance, such as intonation, pace, facial expressions, and gestures, have been lost. This is as true of the Qur’an as it is of Delphic oracles. The fact that there is a tradition of oral performance of Qur’anic recitation does not make the lost elements of the original performance readily observable.

In recent decades, a number of scholars have applied the theory of speech genres to analysis of the Bible, and, particularly on account of the Qur’an’s status as a sacred text, these scholarly forays may throw light on the application of speech genre theory to the Qur’an as well. A notable work in this regard is Roland T. Boer’s edited volume, *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, in which eleven contributions draw on various theories of Bakhtin in analyses of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the novel (Boer 2007). The scholars draw on several of Bakhtin’s literary theoretical concepts, such as dialogue, heteroglossia, and the chronotope, but three studies, those of Martin J. Buss, Carol A. Newsom (2007), and Christine Mitchell, focus most directly on speech genres. Martin Buss, an authority on the history of form criticism, examines divine-human address as a genre in the Hebrew Bible, arguing that genres can engage in a dynamic interchange with other genres. He argues for a flexible definition of genre that can accommodate association with any of the categories of content, form, or function on its own (Buss 2007). Buss’s essay provides insightful analysis of the ways in which genres may interact in a larger text. In my view, however, such a loose definition of genre is not helpful for the analysis of Qur’anic

genres, at least at this point in the history of the field, the stage when genres and must be identified and described and their conventions determined. Buss is arguing against an overly rigid conception of genre after hundreds of other studies have sought to analyze Biblical texts as belonging to particular genres that have been defined, investigated in detail, and argued over for many decades.

Carol Newsom examines the genre of apocalyptic, and particularly the work of the Society for Biblical Literature group that examined Apocalypse literature and published their findings in an issue of the journal *Semeia* with the title *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Collins 1979). She considers the various conceptual frameworks that have been adopted in recognizing the genre, whether classification (essentially, listing features), family resemblance, intertextuality, prototype, or historical evolution. She ends with a model that draws on the theories of Bakhtin and views genre as a mode of cognition, a way of seeing used by the reader.¹⁵ This essay also addresses a field at an advanced stage of development in the investigation of genres, when scholars have done the work of identifying, listing, and describing genres and addressing their basic formal and rhetorical features. After that work is accomplished, scholars may go on to address the effects of the individual uses and performances of genres in particular contexts and to consider how those might transform the genres themselves. Several of these conceptions are important for consideration of genres in the Qur'an, but it must be recognized that the model of classification is only now beginning to be applied in Qur'anic studies. Biblical studies scholars have critiqued that approach because it has been over-used in their field and because many scholars have treated forms as extremely rigid and have ignored the elements of variety, hybridity, innovation, and literary artistry in the text (Muilenburg 1969; House 1992). Moving forward in Qur'anic studies one might proceed with classification but keep flexibility in mind. The model of historical evolution is important for investigations of the Qur'an, especially since the issue of the chronology of the Qur'an's surahs has figured so prominently in the history of the field. The work of Angelika Neuwirth on the relationship of the Qur'an's surahs to liturgy and to the formation of community may be interpreted as engaging in this type of investigation. However, there is a danger that investigations of Qur'anic forms will be set up from the start to show that they changed over time from the Meccan to the Medinan period, and that some of the possible benefits of paying close attention to the classification model will be lost.

Christine Mitchell analyzes the generic conventions of a passage in Chronicles 2 13:23–15:15 that narrates the beginning of the reign of Asa, the fifth king of the House of David, and includes an anomalous section showing Asa smashing idols and destroying altars. She argues that the Chronicler in this passage, drawing on the Book of Judges, is deliberately modifying the historical genre in which Chronicles is generally couched in order to affect the image of Asa and to transform the genre, giving it a theological component. Her general argument is that a genre is flexible and may be manipulated and transformed in particular instantiations, a view shared by many Biblical studies scholars who engage in what has been termed "rhetorical criticism" or "socio-rhetorical criticism". They point out that form criticism stops at a certain point; in stressing what texts of the same form or genre share, this form criticism misses how these similar texts differ and what particular effects they convey.¹⁶ An excellent example of rhetorical criticism in Qur'anic studies is the essay of Shawkat Toorawa on the *Mu'awwidhatān*, that is, Sūrat al-Falaq (Q 113) and Sūrat al-Nās (Q 114), which shows that despite having a shared form, they actually create quite different rhetorical effects (Toorawa 2002).

Drawing on the genre theories of Thomas O. Beebe, Mitchell presents a quadripartite evolutionary scheme of scholarly approach to genre that resembles the stages of developmental psychologists such as Piaget, Kohlberg, and others (Mitchell 2007; Beebe 1994). In the ancient-through-Renaissance stage (1), genre theory was prescriptive, oriented toward production. In the early modern stage (2), genre theory focused on classification, including the growth and change of genres over time. In the early twentieth-century stage (3), genre theory focused on textual patterns, forms, and features that constitute a genre. Lastly, in

the late twentieth-century stage (4), genre theory focused on conceptions of genres located in the reader. Mitchell locates much of Biblical criticism in the third stage, and argues that before moving to the fourth stage, the field is producing many studies that stress the dynamism of genre, looking at their combination and recombination in various texts and contexts. A consideration of Qur'anic studies in light of this scheme suggests that it includes a number of studies that engage in the second and third stages, but that neither mode has been pursued programmatically, let alone in a comprehensive manner.

Overall, Bakhtin's theories, which had been influenced in part by Biblical form criticism, are being returned to the source and used to new effect in Biblical studies. While many critics are focusing on other theoretical concepts that Bakhtin proposed, some have drawn on his work on speech genres (Green 2000; Boer 2007). The chief effects of this move are bringing a heightened awareness of the workings of natural language in social settings to the text, and it is this especially, in my view, that will be useful for future studies of the Qur'an.

A limited number of studies have been carried out on the speech genres of the Arab world, mainly by folklorists, anthropologists, and linguists. Folklorists going back to the nineteenth century have addressed a number of speech genres, including proverbs, folktales, ballads, oral epics, shorter poetic forms of oral poetry, funerary laments, riddles, nursery rhymes, and others.¹⁷ Among the anthropologists, Edward Westermarck's works on Morocco addressed proverbs and curses, among other genres. Michael Gilsean wrote about the dynamics of lying and honor among men in Lebanese society. Lila Abu-Lughod wrote about the *ghinnāwa*, a short poetic form performed by women of the Awlād 'Alī tribe in the Western Desert of Egypt. Steven C. Caton discussed several genres of oral poetry in a tribal region in Northern Yemen, highlighting their cultural, social, and political functions. Deborah Kapchan wrote about women's use of hybrid genres in Morocco.¹⁸ Linguists, including F. Dunkel, François Dornier, Charles Ferguson, and others, wrote on politeness formulae, blessings, and curses. Dilworth B. Parkinson treated terms of address in Egyptian Arabic.¹⁹ As part of a long-term project, I have discussed a number of speech genres in Egyptian Arabic, including blessings, politeness formulae, retorts, curses, women's slanging or invective (*radh*), jokes, boasts, threats, and preposterous boasts (Stewart 1996a, 1997, 1996b, 2015b, 2019).

The application of speech genre theory, or the ethnography of speech, to the Qur'an has been extremely limited to date. Folklorist Alan Dundes discussed a number of speech genres in his 2003 work *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur'an* (Dundes 2003). After writing on the presence of folkloristic elements in the Bible (Dundes 1999), he adopted a similar approach to Islam's sacred text. In examining the Qur'an, Dundes makes a number of interesting observations that Arabists and specialists in Qur'anic studies would have been unlikely to notice. For example, he points out that Qur'anic questions such as "Is darkness equal to light?" (13:16; 35:20) belong to the folkloric genre of the "pointed rhetorical question" that appeared in ancient Sumerian "Can one conceive without intercourse?" or "Can one get fat without eating?" and lives on in modern English "Is the Pope Catholic?" or, in the negative, "Does a chicken have lips?" (Dundes 2003, p. 39). Overall, the main genres he treats in the work are fables and folktales of various types, parables, and proverbs.

An important recent contribution that applies speech genre theory to the Qur'an is Adam Flowers 2018 article, "Reconsidering Qur'anic Genre." Flowers begins with the observation that, while the works of earlier authors in Qur'anic studies such as Alfred-Louis de Prémare, Carl Ernst, Neal Robinson, and Angelika Neuwirth identify a number of genres in the Qur'anic text, none has approached the topic systematically. He advocates for a comprehensive analysis of the generic building blocks that make up all of the Qur'an's surahs. Genres, he notes, are associated with different levels of organization of the text, including individual passages within a surah, individual surahs, or the whole Qur'an. Drawing on Bakhtin, he differentiates between primary genres, which form a single unit and contain text that belongs to only one genre, and secondary genres, which consist of combinations of primary genres. He notes the difficulties involved in demarcating textual

units in the Qur'an, but identifies four factors as important for undertaking this type of analysis: (1) thematic coherence, (2) syntactic coherence, (3) boundedness, and (4) social function. As an example, he analyzes Sūrat Āl Imrān (Q 3), breaking it down into sections that are defined in generic terms. He concludes that the surah includes four primary genres: (1) creed, (2) religio-political commentary, (3) prophetic narrative, and (4) exhortation. The primary genres of this surah are joined together to form secondary genres: (1) the proem, a preamble introducing the main focus of the surah, (2) the monograph, an extended discourse focusing on a single topic, and (3) narrative exegesis. Together, the secondary genres combine to form a tertiary genre, that of the complete surah (Flowers 2018). Flowers' foray into the application of genre theory to the Qur'an has opened up a path for further investigations by analyzing several particular genres, suggesting possible factors to be taken into account when identifying Qur'anic genres, and investigating the ways in which primary genres are combined in the text for particular rhetorical effects.

Speech genre criticism does not differ radically from form criticism or attention to genre generally. The difference is only a matter of emphasis on speech performances that occur natural spoken language, drawing insights from such material regarding the social context, functions, and other features of genres that may be brought to bear on particular examples. It may be applied successfully to literary texts which, strictly speaking, are not actual instances of speech genres but mediated versions or representations thereof. In addition, an appeal to speech genres, as a hermeneutical tool, need not commit the interpreter to a theory of the exclusively oral performance of the Qur'an.

As mentioned above, earlier Western Qur'anic studies scholarship has addressed a limited number of salient Qur'anic genres, including punishment stories, parables, prayers, and oaths. I have investigated the conventions of several Qur'anic speech genres, including oracular oaths, omens, protective charms, divine epithets, prayer, orations, and the cognate curse.²⁰ However, the analysis of the speech genres that make up the Qur'an remains to be undertaken in a comprehensive manner. A list of the Qur'an's genres, even if tentative, is certainly a desideratum. An important step towards this goal is the identification of the Qur'anic terms that serve as generic labels such as *du ʿā* "prayer", *tahīyyah* "greeting", or *qasam* "oath". It will also be worthwhile to provide more precise and fuller accounts of the conventions of the genres that have already been identified and subjected to some analysis, such as prayer or parables. The completion of such tasks is beyond the scope of this essay. In what follows, I set out simply to demonstrate the utility of attention to generic conventions and to the comparative insights one may draw from considering the usage of natural language genres for the interpretation of Qur'anic passages.

5. Drawing on Generic Conventions to Interpret Texts in the Qur'an

In the following remarks, each section discusses an interpretive crux that may be resolved by attention to genre and generic conventions. The analysis draws as well on other methods of analysis, invoking lexical, grammatical, stylistic, and logical considerations of many kinds. No premium is set on methodological purity. Attention to speech genres generally must be combined with the usual set of philological tools at scholars' disposal.

I. *wa-l- ʿaṣrī* (103:1)²¹

The word *al- ʿaṣr* occurs in an oath at the opening of Sūrat al- ʿAṣr (Q 103). The surah is very short, consisting of only three verses, so that the context provides little immediate help for the interpretation of its meaning. The word only occurs in this one instance in the Qur'an:

1. *wa-l- ʿaṣr*
2. *inna l-insāna la-fi khusr*
3. *illā lladhīna āmanū wa- ʿamilū l-ṣālihāti wa-tawāṣaw bi-l-ḥaqqi wa-tawāṣaw bi-l-ṣabr*

1. By the *ʿaṣr*
2. Indeed, man is in a state of loss

3. Save those who believe and do good works and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to patience.

The word *ʿaṣr* has several distinct possible meanings: (1) era, period; (2) late afternoon; and (3) the act of pressing (e.g., olives, to extract olive oil). The available English translations have drawn on the first two meanings in rendering the opening verse of this surah. Several translators opt for the meaning “era” or “period of time”, as follows:

“By (the token of) Time through the Ages.” Abdullah Yusuf Ali

“I swear by the time.” H.M. Shakir

“Consider the flight of time!” Muhammad Asad

Others draw on the meaning “late afternoon”:

“By the declining day.” Marmaduke Pickthall

“By the afternoon.” A.J. Arberry

“I swear by the declining day.” Muhammad Abdel Haleem

These two sets of translations are obviously distinct from each other, but the immediate context does not allow the investigator to decide which one is correct. A way forward is presented if one recognizes that this entire short surah belongs to a particular genre, that of an oracular pronouncement introduced by an oath or series of oaths. This genre occurs dozens of times in the Qur’an, most frequently at the beginnings of surahs. It is recognized in Islamic literature, including the *Sīrah* of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), as having formed part of the repertoire of pre-Islamic divines or soothsayers. The oaths are often cryptic, and the connection between them and the content of the following message is often not obvious.²² This element of a mysterious gap between the oath and the message is a standard feature of the genre; it is the main reason for the difficulty one experiences in using the context to interpret the meaning of *al-ʿaṣr*. Fortunately, attention to other instances of the genre allows the investigator to settle the issue definitively. Oracular oaths often refer to the sun and the moon, night and day (e.g., 91:1–3; 92:1–6). This practice is evidently intended to emphasize the truth of the statement by invoking unwavering regularity: the utterly reliable reappearance of the sun and the moon and the regular alternation of night and day. In addition, oracular oaths often refer to particular times of day, and not simply to day and night, apparently for the same reason: to stress the regularity of their recurrence. Examples include the following:

wa-l-ṣubḥi idhā tanaffas “By the morning when it breathes” (81:18);

fa-lā uqsimu bi-l-shafaq “Nay! I swear by the twilight!” (84:15);

wa-l-ḍuhā “By the late morning” (93:1);

wa-l-fajr “By the dawn” (89:1).

Because other examples of the genre include oaths referring to specific times of day, *al-ʿaṣr* likely means “late afternoon”, similarly referring to a specific time of day as a strategy of stressing the veracity of the following statement. Like dawn or twilight, the afternoon is a reliably recurrent event. Translations that refer to “time”, drawing on the meaning “era” or “period” are simply mistaken.

II. *al-Ḥāqqah* (69:1–3)²³

Another puzzling text occurs in the first three verses of Sūrat al-Ḥāqqah:

1. *al-ḥāqqah*
2. *mā l-ḥāqqah*
3. *wa-mā adrāka l-ḥāqqah*

1. The ḥāqqah.
2. What is the ḥāqqah?
3. And what will have you know what the ḥāqqah is? (69:1–3)

The meaning of *al-ḥāqqah* is difficult to determine. Thought it occurs three times in the Qur'an, all of these occurrences are in this single passage, so that interpreters cannot have recourse to other occurrences of the term to help determine its meaning. In addition, these verses themselves do not provide contextual clues regarding the sense of the word. Several translators render *al-ḥāqqah* as "reality", "truth", or something similar, evidently adopting an etymological interpretation, since the word *al-ḥāqqah* has the same root consonants as the nouns *al-ḥaqq* "the truth" and *al-ḥaqqīqah* "the truth" or "reality".

1. The Reality.
2. What is the Reality?
3. What will make you understand what the Reality is? (Abdullah Yusuf Ali).
1. The Reality!
2. What is the Reality?
3. Ah, what will convey unto thee what the reality is! (Pickthall).
1. The Indubitable!
2. What is the Indubitable?
3. And what will teach thee what is the Indubitable? (Arberry).
1. The Inevitable Hour!
2. What is the Inevitable Hour?
3. What will explain to you what the Inevitable Hour is? (Abdel Haleem).
1. OH, THE LAYING-BARE of the truth!
2. How awesome that laying-bare of the truth!
3. And what could make thee conceive what that laying-bare of the truth will be? (Muhammad Asad).

"Reality" is favored by translators because, in addition to its relation to the root combination *ḥ-q-q*, it grants to the text a certain mystical allure or appeal to the transcendent, suggesting that the Qur'an reveals profound truths or secrets about the "real" as opposed to the "apparent" world. Abdel-Haleem's rendition is preferable to the preceding translations, in my view, in that it refers to a specific event and not to a state. Muhammad Asad's translation combines the idea of a state, the existence of the truth, with an event, the act of revealing or exposing that truth.

This text belongs to another oracular genre that occurs a number of times in the Qur'an, also usually at the beginnings of surahs, and taking the form: *X, mā X, wa-mā adrāka mā X*, literally "X. What is X? And what made you know what X is? Y." The genre thus takes the form of a series of questions about X, which is repeated verbatim, and an answer Y, which is meant to explain X. Generally, X in the Qur'anic examples refers to a future event, one of the conditions precedent to, or harbingers of, the Day of Resurrection and Judgment, and Y is a description of some aspect of the end time. No specific term for this genre appears in the Qur'an or in secondary scholarship. I have been frustrated in the attempts to come up with an appropriate label for the genre, which would need to capture both that the meaning of a mysterious term is queried and then provided and that the text is an omen of sorts. The tripartite question that is characteristic of this genre occurs verbatim a number of times in the Qur'an, with various key terms.

1. *al-qāri 'ah*
2. *mā l-qāri 'ah*
3. *wa-mā adrāka mā l-qāri 'ah*
1. The Knocking blow!
2. What is the Knocking blow?
3. And what inform you what the Knocking blow is! (101:1–3)

The *mā adrāka* construction occurs many times in the Qur'an, sometimes in the full form, as is the case here and in 82:14–19, in which the key term is *yawm al-dīn* "the Day of Judgment", and sometimes in truncated form (74:26–27; 83:7–8; 83:18–19; 86:1–2; 90:11–12; 97:1–2; 104:4–5). As is the case with the oracular oaths, there is evidence that this

genre also formed part of the repertoire of pre-Islamic soothsayers. The key term—here, *al-qāri ‘ah*—is intended to be ambiguous. *Qara ‘a* is not a mysterious word in itself—it is a common verb that means to knock, strike, rap, or bang. Accordingly, the feminine active participle *al-qāri ‘ah* would mean “the thing that knocks or strikes”. One might also connect the term with the idiom *qara ‘a l-asmā* “to knock the ears”—i.e., to grab forcefully one’s aural attention—and render *al-qāri ‘ah* as “the deafening blow” or “the ear-splitting blow”; this would be in keeping with other terms denoting disastrous events that have an aural component such as *al-ṣayḥah* “the shout” or “the cry”. The problem is that its referent is not clear. What is it, exactly, that will knock? The tripartite text introduces an oracular message, usually an omen, referring to a future event that will befall. In the Qur’ān, that event almost always has to do with the Resurrection or the Day of Judgment. The ambiguity of the term used in the *mā adrāka* construction is a standard feature of the genre. It is somewhat resolved by the message given in the following text, which indicates the predicted event to which the ambiguous term refers. As is known from other oracular traditions, even the full forms of oracular texts, those which provide the message or the answer to a query and not just the question, often remain ambiguous to a large extent. As in the previous example, the ambiguity that is a conventional feature of the genre is what makes the term difficult to interpret in the first place.

The other terms that occur in the *mā adrāka* construction and in similar contexts include many that formally resemble *al-ḥāqqah*, which is a definite, feminine singular active participle. Other terms of the same form that occur in similar oracular passages, as well as passages that describe a destructive force, include the following:

al-qāri ‘ah “the striking blow” (101:1);

al-wāqi ‘ah “that which befalls” (56:1);

al-ṭāmmah “the overwhelming surge” (79:34);

al-ṣākhkhah “the clanging blow” (80:33);

al-ṣā ‘iqah “the felling blow” (2:55; 4:153; 41:13, 17; 51:44);

al-ghāshiyah “the encompassing surge” (88:1).

A related term that is not a participle is the feminine singular noun *al-ṣayḥah* “the cry, shout” (11:67, 94; 15:73, 88; 23:14; 29:40; 36:29, 49, 53; 38:15; 50:42; 54:31; 63:4). All of these terms describe something that occurs suddenly, invoking a single event or action. They are all somewhat vague in that they are adjectival forms describing a noun that is omitted.

The translations that adopt the meaning “truth” or “reality” do not accord with the conventions of the genre, because neither truth nor reality is a swift action or a sudden event that is predicted to take place in the future. Both refer instead to a stable entity or state. The key terms that occur in similar contexts, such as *al-qāri ‘ah* and *al-ghāshiyah*, may be likened to a category of words used in Arabic to describe unexpected events, many of which adopt a similar form: a feminine singular active participle. The most common of these is *muṣībah* “disaster” which occurs several times in the Qur’ān (2:156; 3:165; 4:72; 5:106; 9:30; 42:30; 57:22; 64:11). The word *muṣībah* means literally “that which strikes the target”: the event is likened to an arrow. Other similar terms that do not appear in the Qur’ān include *ḥādithah* “accident”; *nāzilah* “mishap, calamity”; *nā ibah* “calamity, misfortune”; *dāhiyah* “catastrophe, calamity”; and *ṭārī*, pl. *ṭawārī* “emergency”. The regular occurrence of terms of this type in the *mā adrāka* construction suggests that *al-ḥāqqah* is similar. It must refer to a singular event, so being certain or true or correct does not fit the context.

The chief feature that has rendered it difficult to translate *al-ḥāqqah* in a way that conforms with the other similar terms that occur in the Qur’ān is that the associated verb, *ḥaqqā, yaḥiḥqu* is intransitive, while the others such as *al-qāri ‘ah* are transitive. One may liken the use of *al-ḥāqqah*, to a limited extent, to the use of the verb *jā a, yajī u*, which is most commonly intransitive, in curses, in which it acts as a transitive verb, as in the Egyptian Arabic *gatak muṣībah* “may a disaster befall you”. One may liken *al-ḥāqqah* to the terms above such as *ḥādithah* “accident” and *nāzilah* “mishap, calamity” which are likewise

intransitive and refer to something that occurs or comes to pass. Still in these cases, though, the participles refer to something that occurs suddenly, at a particular point in time, and not to an ongoing state.

Some relevant evidence for the meaning of *al-hāqqah* may be provided by the use of the cognate verb *ḥaqqā*, *yaḥiqqu* in the Qur'an. It appears twenty times in all in the text, once in the passive form *ḥuqqat* (84:2, 5), once in the active imperfect *yaḥiqqu* (36:70), twelve times in the third-person masculine singular perfect, *ḥaqqā* (7:30; 17:16; 22:18; 28:63; 32:13; 36:7; 37:31; 38:14; 39:19; 41:25; 46:18; 50:14), and five times in the third-person feminine singular perfect, *ḥaqqat* (10:33, 96; 16:36; 39:71; 40:6). The last two categories are most relevant for this investigation; they regularly occur in the context of punishment stories. The agent of the verb is either a disaster or a word indicating a statement or promise. In the first case, the meaning would be "befell, came to pass".

wa-kathīrun ḥaqqā 'alayhi l- 'adhāb "And the punishment befell many." (22:18)

in kullun illā kadhdhaba r-rusula fa-ḥaqqā 'iqāb "Every one of them denied the prophets, and My punishment came to pass." (38:14)

kullun kadhdhaba r-rusula fa-ḥaqqā wa 'īd "Every one denied the messengers, and My threat came to pass." (50:14)

The context suggests that *ḥaqqā* means "befell" or "came to pass" here. The events that occur are the punishments of historical peoples who denied their prophets. In 22:18, the idea that the punishment happened to a particular object is conveyed by the preposition *'alā* "on" *ḥaqqā 'alayhi l- 'adhāb* means "the punishment befell him", but this prepositional phrase is absent in many of the instances in which the verb occurs. If one extrapolates the meaning of *al-hāqqah* from these uses of the cognate verb, it is "that which befalls".

In other cases, the agent of the verb *ḥaqqā/ḥaqqat* is *qawl* "statement" or *kalimah* "word". "Statement" evidently means here "word" in the sense of giving one's word or making a promise. ("Promise" happens to be the ordinary sense taken on by the originally Arabic etymon *qōl* in Persian.) A number of translations use the term "decree" to convey the idea that God's word in these contexts is His threat to destroy a people if they do not heed His warnings or His messengers. A general statement of God's treatment of rebellious communities is the following: *wa-idhā aradnā an nuhlika qaryatan amarnā nutrifihā fa-fasaqū fihā fa-ḥaqqā 'alayhā l-qawlu fa-dammarnāhā tadmīrā* "And when We intend to destroy a city, We command its affluent members, and they disobey therein; so the promise is fulfilled upon it, and We destroy it utterly" (17:16). Here the event which befalls the city, designated by the phrase *fa-ḥaqqā 'alayhā l-qawlu*, is God's destruction of it indicated in the immediately following phrase *fa-dammarnāhā tadmīrā*, "We destroy it utterly", which is introduced by the particle *fa-*, indicating consequence. Another passage that stresses the recurring pattern of punishment is the following: . . . *ḥaqqā 'alayhimu l-qawlu fī umamin qad khalat min qablihim min al-jinni wa-l-insi innahum kānū khāsirīn* " . . . the promise is fulfilled upon them, along with nations of *jinn* and men who passed before them: they were losers" (41:25; 46:18). Several instances of the verb *ḥaqqā* along with *qawl* also occur in reference to those who enter Hell:

wa-law shī' nā la-ataynā kulla nafsīn hudāhā wa-lākin ḥaqqā l-qawlu minnī la-amlā' anna Jahannam

And if We had willed, We could have given every soul its guidance, but the promise from Me—"I will surely fill Hell with jinn and people all together"—will come to pass. (32:13)

fa-ḥaqqā 'alaynā qawlu rabbīnā innā la-dhā'iqūn

The promise of our Lord has come to pass against us: we will certainly taste (punishment). (37:31)

Here the event that will come to pass is the torment that will occur in Hell, and not the destruction of past nations in this world. In all these cases, there is a possible ambiguity in the meaning of the verb *ḥaqqā*. One may interpret it either as meaning "to befall", focusing

on the punishment that is the object of God's prior promise or threat, or as meaning "to come true, to be fulfilled", focusing on the act of promising itself.

The same ambiguity may be observed the instances of the verb *ḥaqqat* that occur with the agent *kalimah* "word". A general statement of this type is the following: *ka-dhālika ḥaqqat kalimatu rabbika 'alā lladhīna fasaqū* "Thus the word of your Lord has come to pass upon those who disobeyed: they will not believe" (10:33). Here, the *kalimah* may be understood as the prior promise or prediction of God that they would not believe. A similar statement is *wa-ka-dhālika ḥaqqat kalimatu rabbika 'alā lladhīna kafarū* "And thus the word of your Lord has come to pass upon those who disbelieved" (40:6). Another passage that uses this turn of phrase depicts the denizens of Hell, and is thus similar to 37:31, mentioned above:

Those who disbelieved will be driven to Hell in groups. When they arrive there, its gates will be opened and its keepers will ask them: "Did messengers not come to you from among yourselves, reciting to you the revelations of your Lord and warning you of the coming of this Day of yours?" The disbelievers will cry, "Yes indeed! The decree of torment has come to pass on the disbelievers (*qālū balā ḥaqqat kalimatu l-'adhābi 'alā l-kāfirīn*)." (39:71)

A more specific reference to examples of destroyed nations in the past occurs in the Sūrat Ghāfir (Q 40).

Before them, the people of Noah denied, as did the parties afterwards. Every community plotted against its prophet to seize him, and argued in falsehood, to discredit the truth thereby. So, I seized them, and how was My punishment?!

And so, your Lord's word came to pass on the disbelievers—that they would be the inmates of the Fire. (40:5–6)

God's word here is evidently His threat, mentioned at the end of 40:6, that the disbelievers would end up in Hell, but the event which His word predicts is His act of seizing them. This captures the ambiguity involved generally in these turns of phrase, which is an intentional feature of the punishment stories.

References to God's promise or threat coming true or being fulfilled suggest that *al-ḥāqqah* means "that which is fulfilled" or "proves true". Arabic lexicographers report that the verb *ḥaqqā, yaḥiqqu* has the sense of "to come due" and so *al-ḥāqqah* could refer to something that is unavoidable. As Ghassan El Masri phrases it, *al-ḥāqqah* means literally "that which ineluctably brings into effect what is due to happen" and so refers to consequences that are "owed" (El Masri 2020, p. 86). This sense is captured by Arberry's translation "the inevitable" and Abdel Haleem's translation, "the Inevitable Hour". Another nuance is suggested by the turn of phrase *ḥaqqat il-ḥājah*, cited in the Arabic lexicographers, which Lane translates, "Want befell, or betided, or happened, and was severe, or distressing" (Lane 1863, p. 606). If *al-ḥāqqah* is understood as deriving from this latter sense of the verb *ḥaqqā, yaḥiqqu*, that would be in keeping with the other key terms that occur in this particular genre, and the translation of *al-ḥāqqah* would be either "the calamity" or "the severe or distressing blow". A translation such as "the violent fulfillment" would attempt to combine all three of these senses.

III. wa-mā qawmu Lūṭin minkum bi-ba'īd (11:89)

This phrase occurs in one version of the story of Shu'ayb, that which occurs in Sūrat Hūd (11:84–95). The account of Shu'ayb and his people, Midian, is one example of a punishment story, an important Qur'anic genre that appears frequently in a series of such stories in the middle section of a tripartite surah.²⁴ In *Qur'anic Studies*, John Wansbrough discusses the several Qur'anic accounts of the story of the prophet Shu'ayb as part of an argument that the multiple Qur'anic versions of the same story represent variant traditions that were in circulation independently before being fixed in the text. In his translation of this account from Sūrat Hūd, he renders part of Shu'ayb's sermon to Midian as follows: "My people, let not rejection of me make you guilty, lest that afflict you which afflicted the people of Noah or of Hūd or of Ṣāliḥ, nor are the people of Lot irrelevant" (11:89). He thus

renders the end of the verse, *wa-mā qaḥmu Lūṭin minkum bi-ba ʿīd* as “nor are the people of Lot irrelevant”.

From one point of view, this particular translation serves a key rhetorical purpose. Wansbrough, an astute reader of the punishment story genre—he terms them “retribution pericopes”—understood that they serve an analogical or typological function. The statement that the people of Lot are not irrelevant suggests that their story is applicable to the current audience; the translation of the statement *wa-mā qaḥmu Lūṭin minkum bi-ba ʿīd* in this manner thus accords with the general rhetorical strategy of the punishment stories, drawing an analogy between the historical account and the current situation of the Prophet Muḥammad and his addressees. It may also be understood as corroborating the comparison implied earlier in the verse. The statement “lest that afflict you which afflicted the people of Noah or of Hūd or of Ṣāliḥ” sets up an analogy between the punishments of past peoples and the punishment that might befall Midian. Shu ʿayb is warning Midian that they stand in a parallel situation and could suffer the same fate as their predecessors did.

However, in this case, I would argue that such an interpretation is wrong; *ba ʿīd* here means “far” literally and not figuratively, and this is confirmed by attention to conventions of the punishment story and especially of the ruins discourse which constitutes a major component of the punishment story genre. The Qurʾān often refers to the existence of ruins and remains of earlier civilizations as tangible evidence of God’s destruction of former nations. These include Noah’s Ark, the many-columned city or temple of Iram built by ʿĀd, the buildings carved by Thamūd into the rock of the valley walls, the obelisks or other monuments of Pharaoh, the ruins of the Maʿrib Dam, and so on. These ruins remain as visible signs for posterity, indicating the fates of past nations who did not heed the warnings of their prophets (Stewart, forthcoming b). The “Overturned Cities” (*al-muʿ tafikāt*) inhabited by Lot’s people are frequently cited among these observable ruins that serve as warnings to contemporaries of God’s punishment of past nations. Sūrat al-ʿAnkabūt (Q 29) includes a very brief account of the destruction of the people of Lot:

When Our messengers came to Lot, he was troubled and distressed on their account. They said, “Have no fear or grief: we shall certainly save you and your household, except your wife—she will be one of those who stay behind.

Indeed, we shall send a punishment from heaven down on the people of this city because they were sinners.”

We have left of it a clear sign for a people who comprehend. (29:33–35)

Here the angels reassure Lot that they will save him and his family, with the exception of his wife, when they destroy his city. God then announces, “We left some of it as a clear sign” (*taraknā minhā āyatan bayyīnah*), the pronoun *-hā* “it” referring back to the *qaryah* “city”, for future generations to reflect upon. Another reference to the city’s function as a sign occurs in Sūrat al-Hijr (Q 15):

We turned their city upside down and rained on them a shower of clay stones.

There are truly signs in this for those who can decipher them.

It is still there on the highway.

There truly is a sign in this for those who believe. (15:74–77)

Here, the terms “sign” *āyah* and “signs” *āyāt* are applied to the remains of Lot’s city (vv. 75, 77). The passage also states, *innahā la-bi-sabīlin muqīm* “it”, presumably the city, “is on an established (?) road” (v. 76), a phrase which Abdel Haleem renders as “there on the highway”,²⁵ indicating that the ruins are visible and physically accessible. A third passage referring to the ruins of Lot’s city occurs in Sūrat al-Ṣāffāt (Q 37):

Lot was also one of the messengers.

We saved him and all his household,

except for an old woman who stayed behind,

And We destroyed the others.

Indeed, you people pass over them morning

And night: will you not use your reason? (37:133–38)

This passage refers explicitly to members of the contemporary audience actually walking over the site of annihilation, asking whether they will learn a lesson from this: *a-fa-lā ta 'qilūn* “Will you not comprehend?” (37:138) Unusually, the text does not refer to the city per se but rather to the people who have been destroyed, using the masculine plural pronoun: *wa-innakum la-tamurrūna 'alayhim muṣbiḥīn/wa-bi-l-layli . . .* “Indeed you (pl.) pass over them morning/and night” (37:137–38). The fact that members of the audience are described as passing over them is yet another suggestion that the location of the ruins is well known and relatively close by. These four passages show that the ruins of Lot’s town constitute one of the more prominent examples of ruins in the Qur’an. They are cited frequently as an instructive example for the contemporary audience.

References to these ruins not only suggest that their locations are known and that they can be reached by the audience but also include explicit statements that they do not lie at a great distance. Another passage earlier in Sūrat Hūd makes the explicit point that the town of Lot is not distant from the audience:

And so, when what We had ordained came to pass, We turned it upside down and rained down stones of baked clay upon it, layer upon layer,

Marked from your Lord. *It is not far from the evildoers.* (11:82–83)

The evildoers here evidently refer to the contemporary audience of the Prophet Muḥammad. When the text states, *wa-mā hiya min al-zālimīna bi-ba 'īd* “It is not far from the evildoers”, the pronoun *hiya* evidently refers back to the “city” implied in v. 82, when it states *ja 'alnā 'āliyāhā sāfilahā*, literally “We made its high part its low part” and *wa-amṭarnā . . .* “We rained down upon it . . . ” rather than to the stones or bricks (*ḥijārah*) that were rained down upon them. This is an explicit statement that the ruins of the Overturned Cities are not far away, occurring in the preceding section of the same surah, Sūrat Hūd, and using a similar syntactic construction. In combination with the verses cited above, this example strongly suggests that the phrase in 11:89 means “And the folk of Lot are not far off from you”, referring to physical distance from the audience’s location.

The idea that the ruins of past nations, including Lot’s people, are in the region where the Qur’an was proclaimed to its audience is corroborated by the Qur’an’s ruins discourse in general. It frequently includes directions to the audience: *sīrū fī l-arḍi fa-nẓurū* “travel in the land and observe!” (3:137; 6:11; 16:36; 27:69; 29:20; 30:42). The point of such instructions is that if they travel in the land, they will come upon the ruins and relics of past civilizations and that reflection on those ruins should lead them to realize that God must have destroyed them on account of their hubris and ingratitude to God or their rejection of the messengers whom God sent to them. These commands to travel in the land and observe all imply that the sites of ruins involved can be reached by at least some members of the audience and observed directly. The site of Sodom and Gomorrah, located on the plain at the southern end of the Dead Sea, was apparently known to the audience. This is not surprising, given that Meccans traveled regularly north to Buṣrā for trade.

It is clear from these examples that ruins are often represented as tangible to the current audience of punishment stories. They are portrayed as being near at hand, ready to be observed by the moderns as reminders of the events of sacred history. Among the various punishment stories included in the Qur’an, that of the destruction of the people of Lot is very frequently associated with tangible, nearby ruins. On account of this generic feature of the punishment stories, the phrase *mā . . . bi-ba 'īd* must be interpreted spatially, as meaning “are not far away” and not as “are not irrelevant”, despite the fact that the analogy suggested in the latter case is also a standard feature of the punishment story genre. One may nevertheless admit the possibility that the phrase evokes temporal, situational, and even moral proximity, while referring literally to spatial proximity: the nearness claimed

may resonate on several levels, literal and figurative. A translation such as “near at hand” might convey some of this potential resonance.

The probable cause behind Wansbrough’s choice to translate the phrase in this way may have been a conviction that the actual site of Sodom and Gomorrah was far away from the audience and not in fact nearby. However, “far” is a relative term, and the location of Sodom and Gomorrah may indeed have been described as “not far away” in comparison with other lands such as India or Iran or Byzantium. We have seen the evidence above that the ruins of Lot’s city are described as being well known and accessible to the Qur’an’s audience. Perhaps more importantly, after an account of the destruction of the ancient tribe of ‘Ād in Sūrat al-Aḥqāf (46:21–26), the text states *wa-laqaḍ ahlaknā mā ḥawlakum min al-qurā* . . . “We have destroyed the cities *that are around you* . . . ” (46:27). This indicates that ‘Ād and the other nations of the past that figure in punishment stories are considered to be located in the geographical region of the Meccans, suggesting a large region that stretches far beyond the immediate vicinity of Mecca.

IV. *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah* (15:78; 26:176; 38:13; 50:14)

The term *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah* occurs four times in the Qur’an and is usually interpreted as “the people of the thicket” or “the people of the wood”. This is an alternative designation of the people of Midian, to whom Shu‘ayb was sent as God’s messenger, despite the fact that some scholars have expressed skepticism regarding the connection between Shu‘ayb and Midian on the one hand and the people so identified on the other. The placement of the story of Shu‘ayb and Midian within surahs suggests that it took place at some point during the historical period after the destruction of the folk of Lot and before the time of Moses and the Exodus.²⁶ Gerd R. Puin has argued that the term *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah* refers to the inhabitants of a specific city and that *al-Aykah* is a proper noun that has been altered in transmission. He identifies its referent as *Leuke Kome*—“White Village” in Greek—a site on the Red Sea coast of Arabia just north of, or in the vicinity of, Yanbū‘. He cites three pieces of evidence for this claim. First, the spelling of *al-Aykah* varies in the Qur’anic *rasm*, or the consonantal skeleton of the script. Al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822) already pointed out that the term *al-Aykah* is missing the *alif* in two of the four verses in which it appears. The variant without the *alif* could have been read *Laykah*, or *Līkah*, as opposed to *al-Aykah*. Secondly, *Laykah* resembles Greek *Leuke* phonetically. Thirdly, the logic of the Qur’an’s punishment stories, namely, their hortative nature, requires that the term refer to a specific, well-known site (Puin 2010, pp. 336–46). Puin also asserts that the parallel term *Aṣḥāb al-Rass* “the People of the Well” should be interpreted as a specific reference, using a proper noun, this time to the Arsae or Arsians, a historical people mentioned by Ptolemy as inhabiting the area around Yanbū‘ (Puin 2010, pp. 346–47). Attention to the genre of the punishment story suggests that both these interpretations are incorrect, especially on the grounds that the assertion that the hortatory nature of the punishment stories requires specific references is not upheld by the Qur’anic evidence, and that the traditional interpretation is correct: *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah* means the Companions of the Thicket.

While the resemblance of Greek *Leuke* to a putative form *Laykah*, or perhaps *Līkah*, is close enough for the latter to derive from the former, the other two pieces of evidence are questionable. It is not so odd for *al-Aykah*, in the *rasm* *a-l-a-y-k-h*, to appear in variants as *l-y-k-h*, without *alifs*. Simon Hopkins reports the spelling *a-l-w-l* for *al-awwal* (*a-l-a-w-l*) in early Arabic papyri.²⁷ Alba Fedeli, in her examination of Qur’anic manuscripts, found the omission of an initial *alif* in *ilayka* (4:166) in MS Ming. Isl. Ar. 1572b, f.2v, l.6, i.e., with *l-y-k* appearing for *a-l-y-k* (Fedeli 2014, pp. 224, 265). Similarly, she found that in MS MIA MS.67, f.1r, l.11, the first hand initially wrote *walnjl* (5:66)—with article *al-* and *injil* without the initial *alif*, i.e., *w-a-l-n-j-y-l* for *w-a-l-a-n-j-y-l*—and later corrected it (Fedeli 2014, pp. 205–6, 269). It is thus possible that the form *l-y-k-h* appears for *a-l-a-y-k-h* without indicating that the underlying word must differ from *al-Aykah*.

Puin has recourse to the Qur’anic genre of the punishment story in attempting to interpret this term. This recourse is useful in principle, in my view, but it has not been applied

correctly in this case. The term *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah* does occur in the course of a punishment story, and one may agree that the genre of the punishment story requires evidence that is presented as concrete and tangible in order to be convincing to the audience. However, the Qur'an is generally very sparing in its use of proper nouns. Largely on account of this feature of the text, which must be recognized as part of the Qur'an's general style, an entire genre of exegetical work devoted to *ta'yīn al-mubham* "specifying the ambiguous" arose in the history of pre-modern Muslim scholarship, the most famous exemplar of which is probably *al-Ta'rīf wa-l-i'lām* of al-Suhaylī (d. 581/1185) (al-Suhaylī 1987). The relative absence of proper nouns holds not only for personal names but also for toponyms in particular. Medina is mentioned several times in the form *al-Madīnah* (9:101, 120; 63:8), and once as *Yathrib* (33:13), and Mecca is mentioned twice, once as Mecca (*Makkah*, 48:24) and once as *Bakkah* (3:96). Given the importance of Mecca and Medina for the Prophet Muḥammad's mission, this number of explicit references is shockingly small. In addition, descriptive designations are often used in place of proper toponyms. Mecca is termed *Umm al-Qurā* "the mother of the cities" (6:92; 42:7). The term *al-Qaryatayn* "the two cities" (43:31) is usually interpreted as referring to Mecca and al-Ṭā'if. In both cases, these terms employ a general term, *qaryah* "city" that appears frequently in accounts of the destruction of former peoples, thus connecting Mecca with the nations of the past that appear in punishment stories.

A key example of a descriptive designation within the genre of punishment stories occurs in the story of the destruction Sodom and Gomorrah, which is told a number of times in the Qur'an and, indeed, may have served as a model for the punishment story genre in general. The Arabic equivalents of the toponyms Sodom and Gomorrah never appear in the text. Rather, the cities of Lot's folk are termed *al-Mu' tafikāt* (9:70; 69:9) or *al-Mu' tafikah* (53:53), an adjectival designation that derives ultimately from the Hebrew *mahpeka* "overthrowing", which is used to refer to their destructions in later typological references to their story in the Bible. The term *al-Mu' tafikāt*, which one can take to mean "the overthrown cities", is a *semi-specific* referent. It does not reveal immediately to the audience the identity of Sodom and Gomorrah, and on this account, it has been misinterpreted by a number of translators.²⁸ This ambiguous form of reference is corroborated to some extent by frequent use of the fully generic terms *qaryah* "city", *qurūn* "generation", and *umam* "nations" to refer to the destroyed nations of the past. Indeed, the Qur'an contains a number of full punishment stories that are anonymous, in that neither the name of the prophet in question nor the identity of the nation or people involved is specified. Perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon is the anonymous punishment story that appears in Sūrat Yā Sīn (36:13–39). The story has some specific characteristics, for three prophets are sent, *seriatim*, to preach to a city's inhabitants. Furthermore, the account is relatively lengthy, and it includes an extensive dialogue between the third messenger and his audience. While these features of the account make it quite different from a simple, schematic version of a punishment story, none of the three messengers is named, and the people are designated only as *Aṣḥāb al-Qaryah* "the inhabitants of the city" (36:13), using the same construction found in *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah*. A similar example is that of "the city that was by the sea" (*al-qaryati llati kānat ḥāḍirata l-baḥri*) portrayed in 7:163–67, which is not designated by a proper noun but described in a fashion that makes it not simply the representative of any city that happens to lie near the shore. In that story, the unbelievers and wrongdoers are turned into monkeys or apes, which is not the standard denouement of a punishment story, and so the city in question cannot be understood as representing any past community that was subject to punishment.

Terms of the form *Aṣḥāb al-X*, a genitive construct, occur with relative frequency in the course of Qur'anic punishment stories and also in other narratives. The second term in the genitive construct is most often a noun in the singular with the definite article *al-*. This would make Puin's claimed interpretation, *Aṣḥāb Laykah* = "the Inhabitants of Leuke Kome" relatively unusual, since it would lack the definite article. The exceptions to the general rule—of including a definite article—are *Aṣḥāb Mūsā* "the Companions of Moses"

(26:61), which refers to the Hebrews in the course of their flight out of Egypt while being pursued by Pharaoh's forces, and *Aṣḥāb Madyan* "the Companions of Midian" (9:70; 22:44), which refers to the people of Midian.

In these designations, the first term of the genitive construct, the *aṣḥāb* "Companions, Fellows", are a group of people associated with the item that appears as the second term of the genitive construct. The term *Aṣḥāb* has a number of possible senses, including "owners" and "companions". In the phrases of the form *Aṣḥāb al-X*, *X* most often designates a location, and the entire term refers to the *residents* or *inhabitants* of a particular place. *Aṣḥāb al-Jannah* "the Companions of Paradise", refers to the inhabitants of Paradise, and *Aṣḥāb al-Nār* "the Companions of the Fire" (e.g., 2:39), *Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm* "the Companions of the Blaze" (2:119), and *Aṣḥāb al-Sa'īr* "the Companions of the Scorching Fire" (35:6) all refer to the inhabitants of Hell. *Aṣḥāb al-qubūr* "the companions of graves" (60:13) refers to the dead, buried in cemeteries and contained in their graves, and *Aṣḥāb al-Safīnah* "the Companions of the Ark" (29:15) refers to the passengers on Noah's Ark. The one singular form of this term in the Qur'an, *Ṣāhib al-Hūt* "the Companion of the Whale" (68:48) refers to Jonah, indicating he was contained inside the whale. *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* "the Companions of the Cave" (18:9) refers to the sleepers in the Cave from the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. This is the most common use of the term. In several exceptional instances, *Aṣḥāb* does not refer to inhabitants or residents. *Aṣḥāb al-Fīl* "the Companions of the Elephant" refers to the *owners* of the elephant, a force that deployed an elephant as a military beast, generally identified as an Ethiopian army that attacked Mecca from Yemen in the sixth century. *Aṣḥāb al-Sabt* "the Companions of the Sabbath" (4:47) refers to a group of Jews who broke the Sabbath. *Aṣḥāb Mūsā* "the Companions of Moses" (26:61), as mentioned, refers to Moses' followers, the Hebrews, in the course of their flight from Egypt. Despite these other usages, in the overwhelming majority of cases, terms of the form *Aṣḥāb al-X* refer to the inhabitants of a place or a group of people located in a particular place.

Puin argues that the terms *Laykah* (<<*al-Aykah*) and *al-Rass* are proper nouns, the names of specific places. The evidence that might support this interpretation includes two terms of the form *Aṣḥāb X*. *Aṣḥāb Madyan* (9:70; 22:44) refers to the prophet Shu'ayb's people, identifying them with the specific people, or city, or region of Midian. The other example is *Aṣḥāb al-Ḥijr* (15:80), for *al-Ḥijr* may be the proper name of the city and not just the designation of a "rocky tract", its root meaning, since it appears in the classical works of Strabo and Pliny as Hegra (Harrison 2002, EQ 2). However, most of the designations of the form *Aṣḥāb al-X* are neither entirely general, like "mountains", nor a proper noun designating a single entity, like "Mount Sinai". They are a descriptive reference to what is evidently a specific group. The term *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* does not literally identify a particular region or a specific cave. The referent *al-X* in the terms *Aṣḥāb al-X* often refers to a certain geographical feature: *al-Kahf* "the cave"; *al-Ḥijr* "the rocky tract"; *al-Ukhdūd* "the Ditch". They may be termed *semi-specific*—or, one could say, *semi-generic*—retaining an element of allusion or indirection, which are deliberate features of Qur'anic style generally. For example, the story of Sheba in Sūrat Saba' (Q 34) refers to *sayl al-'arim* "the flood of the dam" (34:16). This is clearly a reference to the breaking of the Ma'rib Dam, which was famous and indeed legendary in Arabian lore, yet it is presented without using the proper noun Ma'rib, even though this would be expected in extra-Qur'anic discourse. Given the fame of the event, it is extremely unlikely that the text implies some uncertainty about which dam was flooded, or where it was actually located. (Modern skeptics, though, are quick to note such references as signs of indeterminate meaning in the text (Rippin 2013)). Rather, a reading of the Qur'an reveals that indirection is prized as conveying a certain literary or aesthetic value to the text. This is evident from many features of the Qur'an. Jerusalem is obviously important in the Qur'an as a whole, given the prominence of David, Solomon, and Solomon's monuments in the text, but it is not mentioned once by name. It is also evident from the example of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*, "the People of the Cave", whose story is told in Sūrat al-Kahf (Q 18:9–26). This story is clearly a version of the Christian Story known as the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, in which a group of young nobles who have converted

to Christianity escape persecution of the Roman Emperor Decius by being miraculously put to sleep for over three hundred years. The Qur'anic version does not mention the city of Ephesus, the Emperor Decius, or the young men's names, but it clearly is meant to be a specific and not a generic story (Tottoli 2003). The label *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* refers not just to any cave, but to the particular cave in which a miracle occurred that was commemorated when a place of worship was constructed on the site. However, it does not provide the explicit name of that particular cave. Similarly, Ephesus is not specified, but the text refers only to *al-madīnah*, "the city", nearby. As mentioned above, punishment stories are often presented in general or anonymous in the Qur'an. The terms *qaryah* "city" and *qurūn* "generations" in particular appear frequently in generic or anonymous punishment stories. The term *Aṣḥāb al-qaryah*, as mentioned, occurs in one of the Qur'an's most prominent anonymous punishment stories, that which occurs in Sūrat Yāsīn (36:13–31) and which commentators have associated with the city of Antioch (Busse 2000).

This being the case, it is not necessary—and even arguably implausible—to interpret *al-Aykah* and *al-Rass* as proper nouns. Even though the peoples designated as *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah* and *Aṣḥāb al-Rass* were specific peoples understood as having lived in specific cities or regions, those labels, retaining an element of ambiguity as they do, are in keeping with the conventions of the punishment story in the Qur'an. Both terms refer to features of the terrain where the people in question lived. *Aṣḥāb al-Aykah* thus in all likelihood means "People of the Thicket", and *Aṣḥāb al-Rass* means "the People of the Well", as is ordinarily understood.²⁹

V. The Meaning of *al-Kawthar* (108:1)

innā a ʿaynāka l-kawthar

fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa-nḥar

inna shānī ʾaka huwa l-abtar

Indeed, We have given you *al-kawthar*!

So, bless your Lord and sacrifice.

Indeed, your insulter is the one whose line is cut off! (108:1–3)

Sūrat al-Kawthar (Q 108), which is named after the word *al-kawthar* that occurs in the first verse, poses an interpretive problem. This *surah* contains only three verses and is devoid of narrative context. Consequently, Richard Bell assumed that the text "belongs" somewhere else, though he admitted that it is not at all clear where, tentatively suggesting that it might be inserted after verse 39 in Sūrat al-Insān (Q 74) (Bell 1937, vol. 2, p. 681). An initial reading of Sūrat al-Kawthar raises several obvious questions, particularly concerning the meaning of the mysterious term *al-kawthar* in v. 1 and the meanings of *al-shānī* and *al-abtar* in v. 3. The dominant interpretation of *al-kawthar* in the tradition has been that it is the name of a river or basin outside the gates of Paradise in which those who are about to enter wash away their blemishes and become utterly clean. However, this interpretation derives little support from the text and appears quite unlikely. Little evidence connects *al-kawthar* with other terms in the Qur'an that clearly refer to superlative bodies of water, such as *Salsabīl* (76:18) and *Tasnīm* (83:27). What facilitated *al-kawthar*'s being associated with a heavenly river, in addition to the hadith reports mentioned below, were the facts that it is an uncommon word, that it is characterized as a reward or gift from God, and that it adopts an emphatic form, *faw ʿal*, and thus potentially sounds fantastic. Notwithstanding, recognition that the *surah* is a retort helps to interpret the *surah*, suggesting that *al-kawthar* means "abundance" and refers to abundant progeny in particular.

Identification of the *sūrah* as a retort is suggested in the literature of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. Western scholars have often expressed misgivings regarding this genre of medieval Islamic scholarship as being historically unreliable. That is, they doubt the historical authenticity of the hadith reports used to substantiate the claims being made about the original circumstances of the revelation and suppose that most of these accounts have been made up after the fact as ad hoc explanations of particular Qur'anic passages. In other words, in their

assessment, accounts of the occasions of revelation are ultimately historical fictions created through an imaginative process in order to provide a back story for particular Qur'anic texts (Rippin 1985a, 1985b, 1988). At this point, some Western scholars throw out the accounts as irrelevant to a correct understanding of the text. I would argue, however, that some *asbāb al-nuzūl* accounts undertake what is essentially a form-critical operation. When seen in that light, they may provide valuable insights. They at times identify—correctly—the particular genre to which a Qur'anic passage belongs, and this insight is a valuable clue to an understanding of the passage.

A number of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* accounts regarding Sūrat al-Kawthar correctly categorize the surah as belonging to the genre of retort and correctly identify the trigger of the retort, the term *abtar* “cut off”. Al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076) provides the following account, one of several similar reports explaining the origin of the surah:

It was revealed concerning al-ʿĀṣ. He saw the Apostle of God coming out of the mosque when he was going in, and they met at the Gate of the Banū Sahn clan and spoke. Some of the notables of Quraysh were inside the mosque, sitting. When al-ʿĀṣ entered, they asked him, “To whom were you speaking?” He replied, “That cut-off man (*al-abtar*)”, meaning the Prophet. (al-Wāḥidī 1991, p. 494)

According to this account, the *sūrah* was revealed in response to an incident when al-ʿĀṣ b. Wāʾil al-Sahmī insulted the Prophet. This account appears to be concerned with specific details, especially the identity of the man who insulted the Prophet and the location or setting. The fact that he is identified as al-Sahmī and the place is identified as the Gate of the Sahn Clan does not appear to be a coincidence. One goal behind the account may have been to denigrate the Sahn clan or al-ʿĀṣ b. Wāʾil al-Sahmī's descendants in particular. Perhaps the actual author of the insult was someone else, and someone who circulated an earlier version of the account modified it, inserting or substituting the name of al-ʿĀṣ b. Wāʾil al-Sahmī because he harbored a grudge against the Sahn clan. Many details are omitted. How did those who witnessed the insult react? Who informed the Prophet of the insult? How did he react when he found out? For present purposes, these details are not so important. Rather, what is crucial about the account is its clarification that Sūrat al-Kawthar represents a retort and that it responds to the specific insult *al-abtar* “cut off”.

Such accounts as that of al-Wāḥidī appear in the genre of *tafsīr* as well, but their import is often ignored or not fully considered when the exegetes who report them propose interpretations of the *sūrah*. The main reason for this appears to be *tafsīr*'s atomistic nature; rather than treating a *sūrah* or passage as an integrated whole, exegetes tend to divide it into discrete verses or cruxes, focusing on each individually and paying less attention to the overall message of the passage, its organic unity, or its coherence. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, adopts this approach in general in his *tafsīr*, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*. In his discussion of Sūrat al-Kawthar, he addresses three cruxes: the meaning of the term *al-kawthar* in v. 1; the meaning of the command *fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa-nḥar* in v. 2; and the identity of the *shānī* or insulter mentioned in v. 3 (al-Ṭabarī 1954, vol. 30, pp. 320–30). These three discussions are for the most part self-contained. The discussion of the meaning of *al-kawthar* in v. 1 in his presentation is unconnected with his discussion of the identity of the insulter in v. 3. While his discussion of this last point gives a number of accounts very similar to those presented by al-Wāḥidī, it does not stress that the entire *sūrah* is a retort and should be interpreted as such. Rather, it merely seeks to explain what the term *shānī* in that one verse means and to whom it refers. This difference in approach results in an infelicitous interpretation of the term *al-kawthar*, which must be closely related to the term *abtar*, the insult word itself, if the text is indeed a retort.

Al-Ṭabarī presents three basic meanings of *al-kawthar* that have been reported, listing them, as in other cases, in descending order of probability according to his assessment. The first interpretation he presents is that *al-kawthar* is the name of a river in Paradise, i.e., a proper noun. This is supported by a total of fifteen reports (al-Ṭabarī 1954, vol. 30, pp. 320–21). Second, nineteen reports indicate that *al-kawthar* means “abundant good” (*al-khayr al-kathīr*) (al-Ṭabarī 1954, vol. 30, pp. 321–23). This interpretation is supported by the

fact that *al-kawthar* is cognate with *kathīr* “abundant” and *kathrah* “abundance”. The third interpretation, supported by only two reports, is that *al-Kawthar* is a pool or basin (*ḥawḍ*) in Paradise, also a proper noun (al-Ṭabarī 1954, vol. 30, p. 323). Al-Ṭabarī’s presentation suggests that he rejects the last interpretation. Al-Ṭabarī’s method in his *tafsīr* is to give his own view after presenting the evidence that has been passed down for the various alternative views upheld in the history of Qur’anic exegesis, and he often attempts to reconcile several of the views expressed, working out a compromise position. To a limited extent, this is true in the case at hand as well: al-Ṭabarī endorses the first interpretation but includes therein aspects of the second. He states that *al-Kawthar* is indeed the name of a river in Paradise that God gave to the Prophet Muḥammad, but he adds that God described it as being “abundant” on account of its exalted status. He lists fifteen more reports that supposedly support this view, describing *al-Kawthar* as a river in Paradise with domes or pavilions of pearl on its banks and white mud redolent of musk, or recounting that it flows over a bed of rubies and pearls, between golden banks, with mud more fragrant than musk and water sweeter than honey and whiter than snow (al-Ṭabarī 1954, vol. 30, pp. 323–25).

The second crux al-Ṭabarī addresses is the meaning of the prayer God commands the Prophet to perform in v. 2. Al-Ṭabarī presents seven interpretations (al-Ṭabarī 1954, vol. 30, pp. 325–28).

The third crux is the identity of the “insulter” mentioned in the text. Al-Ṭabarī first presents a number of accounts similar to those cited above, reporting that the insulter in question is al-ʿĀṣ b. Wāʾil al-Sahmī. However, he then presents one account identifying the insulter as ʿUqbah b. Abī Muʿayt, followed by three accounts identifying the insulter as an anonymous group of Quraysh tribesmen (al-Ṭabarī 1954, vol. 30, pp. 328–30).

The hypothesis that *Sūrat al-Kawthar* is a retort is not simply an unsupported claim preserved in *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports; it is corroborated by several features of the text. These are (1) the prominence of the insulting epithet, *al-abtar*; (2) the use of the emphatic, pleonastic pronoun *huwa* followed by the insulting epithet with the definite article; and (3) reference to *shānī* aka “your hater” or “your enemy”. These features all accord with common features of retorts known from the use of the genre in other observable contexts, in Arabic as well as in other languages.

An understanding of the generic conventions of retorts may thus help provide a better interpretation of this text. From the context of the surah, one understands that the term *al-abtar* is an insult. The exegetical literature defines *al-abtar* in several ways, but the first step toward interpreting the surah is the realization that it presents an insult that is itself a response to an insult. Retorts may take many forms, but they generally share the following features, which may be confirmed from an examination of their actual use in Arabic dialects and in many other languages. A retort implies a communicative exchange between two speakers: retort Y, uttered by responding speaker B, must be an aggressive, scolding, denunciatory, or negative response to initial statement X, uttered by initial speaker A. In general, it is brought about by a specific, offensive element in statement X. This we may call the *trigger* of the retort, the particular item that provokes the emotional reaction and causes the retort. The retort responds most directly to this trigger. Three features that occur very commonly in retorts are repetition of the trigger, retaliation, and escalation. The trigger itself is often repeated verbatim in the retort; otherwise, it is often nevertheless understood, by ellipsis. Retorts often return an insult, applying it to the speaker who first uttered it. In addition, retorts often use emphatic or restrictive constructions to convey the idea that the initial insulting epithet applies more intensely or more fittingly to the first speaker than it does to the original victim (e.g., American English “I know *you* are, but what am *I*?”). Furthermore, retorts often engage in escalation, addressing more negative or more insulting epithets, or more intense versions of the original insulting epithet, to the first speaker.

In *Sūrat al-Kawthar*, the third verse, *inna shānī aka huwa l-abtar*, conforms to the structure of typical, simple retort. The insulting epithet *al-abtar* clearly must have been the trigger in the original statement. For comparison, we may examine the following typical

exchange in Moroccan Arabic dialect: *a-l-ḥmār* “You donkey!”—*nta huwwa l-ḥmār* “You’re the donkey!” or “You’re the one who’s a donkey!” The insulting term *ḥmār* “donkey”, meaning “stupid”, is repeated verbatim in the retort and applied to the original speaker. A similar exchange in Egyptian Arabic might be *yā ghabī!* “Stupid!”—*a-ho inta* “It’s you who are (stupid)!” In this latter case, the word *ghabī* “stupid” is not repeated, but it is nevertheless understood. In both cases, a pronominal form serves to create contrastive emphasis. The word *shānī* here is not simply an enemy or someone who hates, but a person who has uttered an insult or inflicted some harm. The word only occurs in this one passage in the Qur’an, but the cognate verbal noun, *shana’ ān* “hatred” occurs twice elsewhere (5:2, 8). That this was a common term in old Arabic is suggested by the mild curse, recorded in the dictionaries, *lā abā li-shānī ika* or . . . *li-shānīka* “May there be no father to thy hater!” (Lane 1863, pp. 1003–4). The term *al-shānī* survives in some dialects, as in the Palestinian curse *yifdahī shanīnak* “May God disgrace your insulters!” It is thus similar in usage to the terms *‘aduwwak* “your enemy” and *illi yikrahak* “the one who detests you”. Both commonly appear in curses such as Egyptian Arabic *yākhud ‘aduwwīnak* “May (God) take your enemies!” and *yikhrib bēt illi yikrahak* “May (God) make destitute the house of whoever hates you!” The term *al-shānī* thus served as a blanket reference to one’s enemies and actual or potential detractors. The pronoun *huwa + al-* serves to express emphasis and contrast: “He is the one who is *abtar*, not you”. One understands from this that *abtar* is a particularly offensive word that has the potential to spark violence. Of the meanings suggested in the tradition, the meaning “bereft of sons or progeny” referring to someone whose line will die out with his own death, seems the most likely candidate, in that it is a direct, personal insult, and a grave one at that in a patriarchal, tribal society.

The logic of verbal retaliation may be demonstrated from the text of the Qur’an itself. It is worth mentioning that the Qur’an refers explicitly to *lex talionis* “the law of retaliation” (5:45). Another verse is more specifically related to retaliation in the genre of insults.

wa-lā tasubbū lladhīna yad‘ūna min dūni llāhi fa-yasubbū llāha ‘adwan bi-ghayri ‘ilmīn ka-dhālika zayyannā li-kulli ummatin ‘amalahum thumma ilā rabbihim marji ‘uhum fa-yunabbī ‘uhum bi-mā kānū ya‘malūn

And do not abuse those whom they call upon besides God, lest, exceeding the limits, they should abuse God out of ignorance. Thus have We made seem good to every nation their deeds, then their return will be to their Lord, that he might inform them of what they did. (6:108)

This verse counsels the Muslims not to insult the pagans’ gods on the grounds that they will retaliate in kind, insulting the God of the Muslims. The passage thus reveals that the category of insult—*sabb* or *subāb*—ordinarily works in this fashion: that is why the result is predictable. An initial insult may provoke a retort, an insult in response, and the retort will be similar in content to the initial insult. The logic behind the verse is that even though the Muslims are justified in insulting the false gods of the opponents, they should avoid doing so, because experience of the societal use of insults shows that they are usually met with symmetrical retorts, and it would be shameful to provoke the opponents into abusing the one true God. One may suggest that insults are actually the negative counterpart of greetings, of which the Qur’an states the following:

wa-idhā ḥuyyitum bi-ta ḥiyyatīn fa- ḥayyū bi-a ḥsani minhā aw ruddūhā inna llāha kāna ‘alā kulli shay’ in ḥasībā

And when you are offered a greeting, respond with a better one, or return it: God keeps account of everything. (4:86)

Greetings should be regularly returned, and responses should match the initial statement in kind, being either an equivalent greeting, or a better, exaggerated version thereof. Likewise, one may assume, insults are regularly met with an equivalent insult response, or a more intense insult.

The structure of Q 108 stresses the word *al-abtar*, placing it in rhyme position at the end of the third and final verse. This emphasis tends to confirm the supposition that the *sūrah*

is a retort to that insulting epithet in particular. Even if the story about al-‘Āṣ b. Wā’il is not historically accurate, the collectors of such *asbab al-nuzūl* accounts, in presenting them thus, are performing a literary-critical operation and engaging in a type of form criticism. For these accounts more than any others squarely identify Q 108 as a retort that occurred in a particular social setting, facilitating a convincing interpretation of the text. It may be that the transmitters of this account have engaged in some degree of fabrication or embellishment, rendering the account more specific than would have been possible based on historical sources, but the interpretive insight remains valid nonetheless.

The conventions of the genre of retorts, however, suggest that *al-kawthar* stands in opposition to *al-abtar* in some obvious fashion. If retorts commonly return the initial insult to the opponent, they also commonly claim that the recipient of the initial insult has, in fact, qualities that are diametrically opposed to those conveyed by the insult. If someone is insulted as being stupid, weak, dishonest, or cowardly, the retort will claim intelligence, strength, honesty, or bravery. In Egyptian Arabic, an insult intended to put down the opponent as lowly, such as *yā kalb* “you dog!” or *yā garbū* “you low-down varmint!” (literally “desert rat, gerbil”) is often met with the retort *ana sīd sīdak* “I am your master’s master!” reversing the order of things implied by the insult and claiming exalted status relative to the insulter. Etymologically, *kawthar*, of the form *faw‘al* from the root consonant combination *k-th-r*, likely means “abundance” (*kathrah*). The pattern *faw‘al* is emphatic, and so *kawthar* literally denotes “great abundance”. Al-Ṭabarī, along with the exegetical tradition generally, recognizes this as one of the main interpretations, though al-Ṭabarī does not favor it. Various proposals have been made regarding the specific contents of this “abundance” that God has bestowed on the Prophet. The most popular is that it means *al-khayr al-kathīr* “abundant good” and refers either to prosperity in this world or to the promise of reward in the afterlife. Reward in the afterlife may be ruled out. This is suggested by the use of the past tense *a‘ṭaynāka* “We have given you” and by the contrast with the insult *al-abtar*, which must refer to a situation that obtains in the present world. Accepting that the focus is not the afterlife and that the crucial feature of the retort is the creation of a contrast with *al-abtar*, I suggest that *al-kawthar* must refer to the opposite of being bereft of progeny: it must mean here “abundant progeny” rather than some other sort of abundance.

Harris Birkeland also interprets Sūrat al-Kawthar as a retort, but his interpretation differs from that presented here in identifying the nature of the insult and the nature of the retort. In his 1956 study *The Lord Guideth: Studies on Primitive Islam*, Birkeland examined five surahs, Sūrat al-Duḥā (Q 93), Sūrat al- (Q 94), Sūrat al-Kawthar (Q 108), Sūrat al-Fīl (Q 105), and Sūrat Quraysh (Q 106), as throwing light on the experiences of the Prophet Muḥammad during the early years of his mission in Mecca. The chapter on Sūrat al-Kawthar (Q 108), which draws primarily on the exegeses of al-Ṭabarī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), is the most detailed discussion of this surah in secondary scholarship to date. Birkeland also rejects the interpretation of al-Kawthar as a river outside the gates of Paradise. That interpretation, he suggests, grew out of a legendary view of the Prophet’s life in the late seventh century and became the dominant interpretation already in the eighth century. Birkeland also interprets the surah as a retort, and he also identifies *al-abtar* as the key insulting word to which the surah responds. Likewise, in his view, *al-kawthar* must refer to gifts in this world, according to the context, and must be opposed in meaning to *al-abtar*, answering the insult. However, he proposes that the term *al-abtar* means cut off from social support. Therefore, *al-kawthar*, the specific form of abundant good with which God blessed the Prophet, must denote the opposite of being bereft of social support and so refer to the worldly and social wellbeing the Prophet found upon marrying Khadījah (Birkeland 1956, pp. 56–99). I concur completely with Birkeland’s analysis up until the point at which he proposes the specific senses of *al-abtar* and *al-kawthar*.

Other texts in the Qur’an corroborate the view that both *al-abtar* and *al-kawthar* have to do with progeny and not with social support generally. On many occasions, the Qur’an stresses that blood kinship is trumped by ties of faith, but it nevertheless uses terms

associated with family to describe both. This is stressed in a warning to believers in the Prophet's community not to favor family ties over membership in the religious community: "Believers! Do not take your fathers and brothers as allies if they prefer disbelief to faith: those of you who do so are doing wrong. Say [Prophet], 'If your fathers, sons, brothers, wives, tribes, the wealth you have acquired, the trade which you fear will decline, and the dwellings you love are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God brings about His punishment'" (9:23). Sūrat al-Tahrīm (Q 66) scolds several of the Prophet's wives and warns them that their close relationship with the Prophet will not ensure easy entrance into Paradise. Pharaoh's wife is held up as an example of a believing woman married to an unbeliever, and the wives of Noah and Lot are held up as examples of the converse, unbelieving women married to Prophets. The Qur'an also stresses that the true followers of Abraham are not his blood descendants but rather those who adhere to his religious legacy: "Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian, but he was an upright man and a Muslim, and he was not of the idolaters. Those of mankind who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who believe. God is the Protecting Guardian of the believers" (3:67–68). When Noah's son is drowned in a dramatic scene in Sūrat Hūd (Q 11:42–43), Noah remonstrates with God on the grounds that God had promised to save his family (11:45). God's response, that the son in question did not belong to Noah's family (11:46), should not be taken to mean that he was a foster or illegitimate son. Rather, the statement must be understood as indicating that he was not a believer and so should not be considered a proper member of the family. It is not genetic descent but rather belief that determines whether one truly belongs. The religious community is a family, one of spiritual, not biological, kin.

The concept of spiritual kinship or the spiritual family is an important one in the Qur'an and in the history of the early Islamic community (Saleh 2010; Neuwirth 2014b; Bauer 2019). After the *hijrah* to Medina, the Prophet paired members of the *muhājirūn* and the *anṣār*, the Meccan and Medinan Muslims, making them "brothers" despite their lack of blood ties. They would inherit from each other and enjoy other rights normally held by actual brothers. He is supposed to have said, "Let each of you take a brother in God" (Ibn Hishām 1955, pp. 234–35). Moreover, the wives of the Prophet are termed "the Mothers of the Believers" (*ummahāt al-muslimīn*) in the Qur'an text itself. One verse reads *al-nabiyyu awlā bi-l-mu'minīna min anfusikum wa-azwājuhu ummahātuhum* "The Prophet has greater right over the believers than they themselves do, and his wives are their mothers" (33:6). This title has been adopted in the tradition, and Sunni Muslims use it when referring to the Prophet's wives, and particularly *Ā'ishah umm al-mu'minīn* "Ā'ishah, the Mother of the Believers". The term implies that the Muslims form a spiritual family, so that the Prophet's wives are the mothers of everyone in the community. More attention should be paid to the point that terming the Prophet's wives "the Mothers of the Believers" also implies that the Prophet himself is their father. Indeed, variant readings of 33:6 add explicit statements about the Prophet Muḥammad himself. *The muṣḥaf* of Ubayy reportedly added *wa-huwa abun lahum* "And he is a father to them", while to 'Ikrimah is ascribed the reading *wa-huwa abūhum* "And he is their father" (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 8, pp. 8–9). Viewing Muḥammad as the father of the believers does seem in keeping with the claim of prophetic authority over and closeness to believers presented in this verse. If the Prophet was indeed the father of the Muslims, he certainly had abundant progeny, as Sūrat al-Kawthar suggests. The returned insult indicates that even if the insulter had sons, his legacy would nevertheless dwindle and die out in comparison.

6. Conclusions

Both Western Qur'anic studies and traditional investigations of the Qur'an have called attention to some prominent Qur'anic genres such as parables and oracular oaths, and such recognition is one among many indications of their undeniable roles in Islam's sacred text. Nevertheless, Qur'anic exegesis has tended to focus on issues other than genre, including especially grammar, lexicon, syntax, and legal and theological doctrine. Nor

has form criticism become a dominant mode of research in Qur'anic studies, even though some modern scholars have shown interest in the Qur'an's genres in some sense from the late nineteenth century until the present. Speech genre theory, which guides scholars to focus on the conventions of natural speech, including both simple and complex genres, may potentially animate and enrich the interpretation of the Qur'an. Identification of the genres to which particular passages belong and consideration of the conventions of those genres can often help resolve hermeneutical puzzles. Precisely because many scholars have ignored speech genres and have not applied the knowledge and insights gleaned through the investigation of contemporary sociolinguistic material to the Qur'an to date, this approach promises to produce novel results, and some of these investigations may provide compelling solutions to both old and new interpretive problems, increase scholars' confidence in some possible interpretations, and rule out others as improbable.

The passages examined here belong to the genres of oracular oaths, omens, punishment stories, and retorts. Identifying the relevant genres and their conventions is a complex process involving recourse to the many sources of information, including the following: ordinary Arabic speech, pre-Islamic pagan religious practices, Biblical literature, or other bodies of literary and oral texts. Knowledge of speech genres in Arabic dialects and other genres may shed light on the workings and conventions of particular Qur'anic genres such as proverbs, greetings, or retorts. Biblical texts and form-critical studies of the Bible may help with identifying genres shared by the Qur'an and the Bible, such as prayers, hymns, and punishment stories. With regard to the oral performances of pre-Islamic soothsayers, the Islamic tradition preserves limited material, and recourse to other oracular traditions, such as those of Greece and the ancient Near East, may prove useful to fill in gaps in the information provided by Islamic sources. In the end, though, the analysis of speech genres in the Qur'an must rely on a combination of close examination of the Qur'anic material itself and the application of insights gained from the investigation of speech genres in other contexts.

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Notes

- ¹ See (Müller 1896; Vollers 1906; Müller 1969; Neuwirth 1981; al-Hasnāwī 1986; Cassels 1983; 'Umar 1999; Stewart 1990; Stewart 2009; Stewart 2013; Stewart 2015a; Toorawa 2006; Toorawa 2011; Kayam 2020; Klar 2021).
- ² See (Kermani 1999, 2015; Hoffmann 2007; Bauer 2009; Neuwirth 2014a; Serrano 2016; El Masri 2017, 2020).
- ³ This point is made forcefully by Abdel Haleem (2020). See also (Mir 1990b, 2007; Abdel Haleem 1992, 2017a; Neuwirth 2004; Blankinship 2019; Zebiri 2003; Toorawa 2002).
- ⁴ (al-Ṭabarī 2001, vol. 1, pp. 41–42, 46–49). This example has been noted by Samji (2018, p. 270).
- ⁵ (al-Zarkashī 1972, vol. 1, pp. 486–95 (*naw* ' [= chapter] 1); al-Suyūṭī 1995, vol. 2, pp. 283–87 (*naw* ' [= chapter] 66)).
- ⁶ al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb Faḍā'il suwar al-Qur'ān, Bāb Faḍl Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 1–2.
- ⁷ See (Sprenger 1869, vol. 1, pp. 1469–504; Horowitz 1926, pp. 10–32; Bell 1953, pp. 119–28; Wansbrough 1977, pp. 2–5, 19–21; Zwettler 1990; Marshall 1999; Welch 2000; Stewart 2000; Neuwirth 2010, pp. 617–30; Stewart, forthcoming a, forthcoming b).
- ⁸ See (Pautz 1898, pp. 62–68; Hirschfeld 1902, pp. 83–101; Buhl 1924; Sister 1931; Speyer 1961, pp. 426–38; Lohmann 1966, pp. 75–118, 241–87; Ben Shammai 2005, pp. 154–69; Afsar 2005; Zirker 2008; Zahniser 2004; Neuwirth 2004, pp. 470–72; Koloska 2015, pp. 92–110).
- ⁹ See (Smith 1970; Mir 1990a; Neuwirth 1991, 1993; Kandil 1996; Stewart 2006; Ibrahim 2009; Stewart 2011; Schmid 2016; Khan and Randhawa 2016, pp. 99–109; Abdel Haleem 2017b; Schmid 2021; Stewart 2021).
- ¹⁰ <https://corpuscoranicum.de/kommentar/einleitung> (accessed on 16 December 2019).
- ¹¹ On Wansbrough and form criticism, see (Cuypers 2012; Stewart 2016; Graves 2016). I hope to address Bell's debt to the work of Bultmann in a future study.

- 12 I hope to undertake this task after significant preparatory work.
- 13 See (Ben-Amos 1969; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1974b; Gossen 1974; Goffmann 1981; Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; Sherzer 1983; Bauman 1986; Briggs 1988; Richard and Briggs 1990; Haring 1992; Wierzbicka 1991, especially chp. 5: “Speech acts and speech genres across languages and cultures”, pp. 149–96).
- 14 See (Hymes 1974a, pp. 53–62).
- 15 Newsom, “Spying Out the Land: A Report from Genology”, in (Boer 2007, pp. 19–30).
- 16 See (Muilenburg 1969; Jackson 1974; House 1992; Robbins 1996).
- 17 For an overview, see (Reynolds 2007). Some important works include (El-Shamy 1980; Cachia 1989; Reynolds 1995).
- 18 See (Westermarck 1926, 1930; Gilsenan 1976; Gilsenan 1981; Abu-Lughod 1986; Caton 1993; Kapchan 1996).
- 19 See (Dunkel 1930a, 1930b; Dornier 1952, 1953a, 1953b, 1954, 1955; Dornier and Louis 1954; Ferguson 1967, 1976, 1983; Parkinson 1985; Masliyah 2001; Tauzin 2008).
- 20 See (Stewart 2011, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2021, forthcoming a, forthcoming b).
- 21 This section draws on (Stewart 2011).
- 22 See the bibliography in note no. 8 above in general, but especially (Neuwirth 1993). See also (Stewart 2011, pp. 326–27; 2021, pp. 280–88).
- 23 This section draws on (Stewart 2011, pp. 327–29).
- 24 See note no. 6 above.
- 25 *The Qur’an*, trans. (Abdel Haleem 2004, p. 164). The construction of this verse raises some questions, such as what would the exact meaning of *muqīm* be—perhaps “abiding” in this context, when it normally means “erecting”, or “residing”. The context suggests emphasis on the visibility of the ruins themselves, and not on the visibility of the road on which it lies. Indeed, Abdel Haleem’s translation goes along with this idea.
- 26 See (Beeston 1968; Bosworth 1984, 1974; Nawas 2004). Nawas writes that there is no consensus on the identity of the group, but the reference to Aṣḥāb al-Aykah in 26:176 occurs in the course of a punishment story featuring the prophet Shu ‘ayb, the prophet sent to Midian, and this is a clear indication that Aṣḥāb al-Aykah and Midian are identical. See (Tili 2019, pp. 67–69).
- 27 See (Hopkins 1984, p. 30, §27.c.) “Elision of the glottal stop after the definite article”.
- 28 Pickthall, for example, translates the term as “the disasters” in 9:70. For further discussion, see (Stewart, forthcoming c).
- 29 Puin gives the meaning “fountain” for *rass*, but *rass* means, more specifically, “an unlined well”, one that has not been provided with walls, or a lining, of rock or bricks.

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