

QUR'ANIC KERYGMA

Epic, Apocalypse, and Typological Figuration

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And if all the trees on earth were pens, and if the sea and seven more added to it were ink,
the Words of God would not be exhausted. Truly God is Mighty, Wise.

Qur'an 31:27

Storytelling is an important element of the Qur'an's message or *kerygma*. Kerygma, from Greek, means "preaching," "proclamation," "call," "summons," or "mission." In his three major studies of the Bible, Northrop Frye relies heavily on an understanding of kerygma as the proclamatory rhetoric of the Bible, while the vehicle of kerygma is myth.¹ According to Frye, the kerygmatic or proclamatory nature of the Bible is what makes it "more than literature" though it is constructed or composed according to the laws of literature. Similarly, the Qur'an is literature and more than literature. It is of some moment that the etymology of kerygma almost perfectly coincides with the frequent Qur'anic word *da'wa*: "call," "proclamation," "summons," "prayer." The character of the Qur'anic kerygma is also quite unique in world literature, though it may have some features in common with the Bible. But this is not a topic pursued here. At the same time, it must be emphasized that storytelling alone falls very short of covering the totality of the Qur'an's reality with regard to its élan, message, and form. We get closer to understanding the reality of Qur'anic communication and literary energy if we consider its primary, self-acknowledged, and self-defined purpose to be intimately bound up with a performance or recital and rendition of universal truth at the linguistic level and the demonstration of the absolute reality of divine revelation. The wordiness of this assertion seems unavoidable, and it is hoped that by the end of the article, the reader will be able to forgive it. The perspective here is that divine revelation *by, on the part of, and of* the one true God and "His" plan for humanity is the single most important story that the Qur'an is about. Quotations marks are used here to draw attention to the fact that Islam assigns no gender to God, whose chief name in Arabic is *Allāh*, even though the third person male pronoun is typically used in the Qur'an and Islamic literature in general to refer to the one and only creator deity.

Stories in the Qur'an are typically sequential with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The striking feature of Qur'anic narrative is that the entire story is susceptible to being told "in a single syllable," what Norman O. Brown referred to as the *totum simul* of the Qur'anic apocalypse (see later in the chapter). Of course, it may also be told in the more normal narrative fashion, along the lines of the traditional epic. For this we have the sura of Joseph (Q 12) as prime example. Both forms are discussed here.

The reality of divine revelation, as distinct from the details of such revelation, is the all-important truth being conveyed. Once it is acknowledged that divine revelation has always occurred, the Qur'an has accomplished 99% of its purpose. The rest, including historical details, laws, prayers, oaths, prophecies, are simply more occasions to demonstrate the reality and efficacy of divine revelation. The reality and efficacy of divine revelation, the communication of the unknowable God to humanity through prophets, messengers, and divine signs have as their primary purpose to demonstrate the simultaneous nearness and remoteness of the one true God. *Āyāt* ("signs," sing. *āya*) is a key Qur'anic term that means both Qur'anic verse as a quantum of divine communication *and* a created thing as a quantum of divine communication. According to the Qur'an, for example at Q 41:53, God reveals truth through scripture and the totality of creation, which includes the individual in whose soul signs have also been deposited. These nearly infinite individual instances each represent a "sign" of God as its utterly transcendent creator. Such a supra-logical literary purpose – to demonstrate the simultaneous remoteness and nearness of God – functions rhetorically as a "paradox that enlightens the mind by paralyzing the discursive reason."² In the Qur'an, the Arabic word *Allāh* is the most frequent of the numerous "proper" names of the (one and only) "Reality" (*al-Ḥaqq*, another frequent divine name for God mentioned in the Qur'an) and indicates the most sublime and powerful source of creation and author of the cosmos who is also the source and author of the Arabic Qur'an. Thus the presence of Qur'anic revelation is somehow contiguous with the divine presence itself and so it is a symbol of it. The Qur'an is thus a door to what might be thought, using terminology from another tradition, the Kingdom of God. The words of Marshall Hodgson help us to understand:

When read as first intended, as a vehicle for worship rather than primarily as an exposition of truths, [the Qur'an's] very incongruousness and repetitiousness become virtues; that is, almost every element which goes to make up its message is somehow present in any given passage. Its very narratives are not written in the form of stories but in the form of brief, discontinuous statements, holding before the mind the relevance of stories already known or elsewhere explained. Its relatively few legal passages lend themselves more readily to starting a ripple of moral reflection than to subserving technical juridical decisions. Wherever it is opened, the Book is found to be insisting in a single message in every possible context. The message is such that to reaffirm it with one's whole will constitutes an act of worship.

So read, the Qur'an reveals itself as a comprehensive cosmic challenge, monumentally delivered. It is at once more comprehensive in outline and more involved in the details of individual living than are its closest analogues, the Old Testament prophets. . . . It maintains an ultimate perspective on every point that arises, large or small. This it does even verse by verse in its sonorous endings recalling the power and the mercy of God and, more substantially, in the very mixture of passages exalted and prosaic. In Arabic, at least, the exalted passages manage to win out in such contests and give their tone to the whole. This can be seen in the Chapter of Light [Q 24] which contains the most ethereal passage in the Qur'an juxtaposed with what might seem some of its most sordid, dealing with matters of etiquette, with sexual decency, and in particular with an accusation of infidelity levied against a wife of the Prophet. The exalted effect is aided by an effective use of language, which lends an untranslatable dignity even to quite ordinary ideas, so that the phrases seem to take on a more general reference; much of real substance is lost when the thought is cast into less noble rhythms in another tongue.

The Qur'an expresses in this way a total vision of the natural and historical cosmos and of human responsibility therein. This vision is brought out largely in terms of the experience of an individual man (Muhammad) and of the entire community about him,

an experience dominated in turn by the challenge of the very Qur'an which is its commentary, an experience, moreover, which – both during the Qur'anic revelations and afterward – was marked by a unique historical success. This intimate interweaving with the far-reaching experience it illuminates, perhaps even more than its single-mindedness and the monumentality of its formal impact, accounts for the enormous power of the Qur'an as the charter and touchstone of a concrete historical community which has tried in its generations to express the universal.

The Qur'an in its literary form, then, is to be compared not with the form of the Bible but with the form of the life of Christ, which was likewise interwoven with the life of the early community. All the natural features of the life of Christ, as experienced by the Church, point to a single culminating moment, essentially beyond this world's life, into which all believers are to enter at last. On the contrary, though there is development in the Qur'an, every moment of it is equally devoted to the reorientation of this life in its very naturalness. The contrast is shown most keenly in comparing what happens to the soul in a reading of the Qur'an and in a Communion with Christ – the penetrating of divine admonition on the one hand, on the other the assumption into divine atonement.³

Here we would like to focus on what Hodgson refers to as “the enormous power of the Qur'an.” This power is seen to be intimately related to the twin literary energies of epic and apocalypse that circulate ceaselessly through the “text” (oral or written) frequently encountered as actually combined in what may be thought to resemble a musical fugue,⁴ especially in numerous occasions of typological figuration. These elements are key to the Qur'an's “expressive style,” its “form and contents.” Their presence in the text, thus isolated, help us to account for the truly unique Qur'anic intensity which, in the present context, emerges as a distinctive rhetorical profile in the service of the Qur'an's demonstration of and insistence upon divine revelation from the one true God as the central defining reality of human life, collective or individual.

Revelation as Permanent Reality

Imagine that all we knew of what we now call The Qur'an was not a printed text read in conjunction with that “historical community” previously mentioned, that is, the religio-socio-historical phenomenon known now as Islam. Rather, imagine a large papyrus scroll recently discovered in a clay jar in a cave in the desert somewhere in what we now also call the Middle East. Imagine we had no tradition of variants, canonization, commentary, translation, history, or Muslim community to help us understand such a scroll. For heuristic convenience, let us allow that this newly found Arabic scroll is also arranged in the order of the Qur'an as we know it today, the *mushaf*. What would strike us? We would be struck by the way in which the arrangement and language of the text appears to approximate the general form and contents of the epic *and* by the way in which there is a clear emphasis on what has by now come to be known as apocalyptic imagery and topics. We would also notice a virtually uninterrupted stream of typological figuration.⁵ And so we will read this scroll as the sole surviving record of a long since vanished apocalyptic community that had a particularly pointed knowledge of Late Antique religion in the Nile-to-Oxus region; that saw itself as the renewer and renewal of an eternal divine covenant; that believed in divine, authoritative, and normative revelation, verbal and otherwise, from a supreme deity; and that also saw itself as coming at the end of a long historical process we normally think of as “epic” because of its grandeur, the hardships entailed, the knowledge imparted along the way, and the implications it has for the idea of being human. We would notice that it spoke of time and history, nations and peoples, humanity and God, this world and the next in sonorous rhymed prose from the beginning to end, lending unity and coherence to the vision it propounds. We would further note that it spoke of prophets and

their communities,⁶ as if they were one organism: prophets persecuted, communities persecuted; prophets triumph, communities triumph. Moreover, we would see that each prophet, community, and human being may expect to encounter a series of hardships and tests⁷ in their missions, lives, and commitment to God on the straight path, the path of righteousness, which in some ways is simultaneously circular in the sense that humanity began in the presence of God and is striving to return there, from the primordial covenant mentioned frequently in the Qur'an but most dramatically and explicitly at Q 7:172 to the day of judgment and the hereafter, mentioned countless times in the Qur'an as the destination to which all are traveling.

Of course, in this thought experiment we are without the witness of the historical triumph and cultural consolidation of the community primarily addressed in the text and thus one of the more persuasive evidences of Qur'anic kerygmatic power. Let us cheat and assume that we have heard of early triumphs but that, today, traces of such have passed away much like those communities frequently referred to in the Qur'an itself (e.g., Q 2:134, 137; 3:137). Further evidence for such triumphant kerygmatic power resides in the way in which the Qur'an serenely seems to colonize all history and time, all space and place, all existence, cosmic or individual, and to speak with compelling reasonableness about the (only) apparent chaos of human and therefore religious variation and multiplicity (Q 49:13). At bottom, the Qur'an preaches through story the fundamental oneness of humanity, religion, and, of course, God. *Tawhīd* ("making one") the chief Islamic religious teaching is thus seen to combine several unities: theological or spiritual, historical and social. Much of the Qur'an's persuasive and aesthetically powerful rhetoric emerges, so we hold, from the narratological braiding (or "fuguing") of the genres of epic and apocalypse and their literary culmination or climax (cf. apotheosis) in typological figuration. The example of the Prophet Muhammad as a defining and controlling instance of Qur'anic typological figuration demonstrates that he represents a simultaneous and apparently contradictory interest in honoring tradition and promoting radical change and revolution. He is descended from a line of God-sent prophets and messengers whose individual epic struggles culminated in a certain degree of victory and triumph that is celebrated in revelation as a divinely guided historical achievement. At the same time, the Prophet Muhammad insists that the world is on the edge of a radical spiritual revolution for which the literary device of apocalypse is the most faithful and accurate harbinger.

Qur'an as Epic

Just as in ancient Greek literature, the Qur'an combines suras and *āyāt* of passionate intensity, especially in the earliest revelations, with straightforward narrative that characterizes the later suras. The Greeks called the first type *dithyramb*, which was frequently identified with wine and fertility, two quite un-Qur'anic topics. The second type was divided into two parts: (1) *diegesis*, which means telling a story through epic, and (2) *mimesis*, which means showing a story through imitation or drama.⁸ These two terms are useful here because, with the Qur'an, the story is both told *and* demonstrated through Muhammad. In both cases, it is a single authoritative voice that is understood as speaking forth in describing God and the Qur'an's relation to the world, humanity's history, humanity's future, the trials and tribulations that may be expected, and humanity's existential predicament, whether individually or communally. These are epic preoccupations. In the Qur'anic dithyramb, it is not wine and fertility that is being celebrated but rather the existence of the one true God who loves humanity unconditionally (God as "the Compassionate, the Merciful," *al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, Q 1:1) and who demonstrates this love and solicitude by sending prophets and messengers to guide and renew the ancient and, as it turns out, primordial and precreational covenant.⁹ The Qur'an is a celebration of itself: it is its own wine and fertility, however scandalous such a formulation might appear. The ensuing intensity is expressed and signaled in a variety of ways using various key terms such as death, judgment, suffering, revelation, proximity, intimacy, love, wrath, punishment, the

straight path and the Hour, the Cause, the End, and, of course, the deceptively simple and otherwise apparently limited idea of Oneness.¹⁰

Epic seems to transcend typical concerns of genre, even though here we are trying to illustrate what in the Qur'an lends credence to thinking of it as epic. Why should this be helpful in the first place? A recent study of the problem has summarized salient features of the epic that seem to correspond almost perfectly with the Qur'an:

In potential size, epic is hugely ambitious, undertaking to articulate the most essential aspects of a culture, from its origin stories to its ideals of social behavior, social structure, relationship to the natural world and to the supernatural. The scope of epic is matched by its attitude: as Aristotle noted, it dwells on the serious. (Even its meter, says Aristotle, is "most stately and weightiest": *stasimôtaton kai onkôdestaton*, *Poetics* 1459b 34–5.) Epic, the ultimate metonymic art form from the perspective of its *pars pro toto* performance, is on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself.¹¹

That is to say, epic is synonymous with culture, and a given epic, say the *Odyssey*, is a symbol and synonym for ancient Greek culture. The Qur'an is a *metonym*, (literally, "another name") for Islam and the world of Islam. As an epic, granted a particularly distinctive epic, it is understood today as being distinguished from other literary genres by the degree to which a number of more or less standard literary features are deployed. A brief list of these would include, in a somewhat hierarchical order of importance:

1. A luxuriance and privileging of words. Words and their unrivalled importance as conveyers of the Qur'anic epic may seem self-evident and unworthy of notice. However, if we think of epic terminology from Greek culture, we note that the most important all mean "speech" or "words." *Epos*, *logos*, *mythos* each refers to the units of meaning used to tell the epic and the particular "mood" indicated. In the Qur'an, we encounter numerous words that indicate precisely word, speech, communication/revelation. Beginning with the word *Qur'an*, which means "recitation" or "reading," numerous others come to mind: *qāla* and its derivatives, *qaṣas*, *kitāb*, *zabūr*, *āya*, *sūra*, to name only a very few of possible examples that the text at hand celebrates. From this angle, an epic is also about literary composition, understanding, and communication. Words are key to the task at hand; one might say they "interpenetrate with the subject," causing a blurring of distinction between subject and object. (See the preceding discussion of Q 41:53.) In the epic, as the previous quotation from Aristotle indicates, words are typically arranged in the gravest of rhythms and meters and are of the highest artistic value insofar as expressive power, descriptive power, and emotional or kerygmatic power are concerned. In short, in Islam it is the Qur'an with its words, verses, and chapters that represents the presence of God. In this sense, epic is not only a metonym for culture but a metonym for God as well.
2. An epic is frequently the oldest book in a given culture or society. The Qur'an is the first book in Arabic.
3. An epic typically begins "in the midst of the action" (*in medias res*). The *Fātiḥa*, the "opening" chapter of the Qur'an, and other suras precede the telling of the beginning at *Sūrat al-A'raf* ("the Chapter of the Heights," Q 7) where the primordial scene of the covenant is presented in detail, beginning at verse 172, even though at this point in the Qur'an it has been alluded to from time to time previously.¹² So central is this passage to the Qur'an's worldview, it will be helpful to quote it here:

And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" they said, "Yea,

we bear witness” – lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “Truly of this we were heedless,” or lest you should say, “[It is] only that our fathers ascribed partners unto God beforehand, and we were their progeny after them. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the falsifiers have done?” Thus do We expound the signs, that haply they may return.

(Q 7:172–174)¹³

- 4 An epic usually opens with an invocation to a divinity or spiritual reality. In the *Fātiḥa*, literally “The Opening” or “Overture,” the invocatory element is clear in the repeated invocation of the divine names “the Compassionate, the Merciful” (*al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*), which are also repeated in the formulaic invocation, the *basmala*: “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,” which occurs at the beginning of Q 113 of the Qur’an’s 114 suras. But beyond this, the entire *Fātiḥa* may be considered a variation of the epic “proem” as described in the next element.
- 5 The opening also includes a concise and summative statement of themes (*praepositio*) in the opening sura. The *Fātiḥa* so clearly and succinctly articulates the main themes of the Qur’an that its seven verses are recited millions of times a day throughout the Muslim world. It has been called The Prayer of Islam because of the way it summarizes humanity’s relationship to God and God’s purpose for humanity. There is an oft quoted hadith (q.v.) transmitted sometimes on the authority of ‘Alī, sometimes on the authority of Muḥammad, which runs: “All of the scriptures of all the religions are in the Qur’an, all of the Qur’an is in the *Fātiḥa*, all of the *Fātiḥa* is in the *basmala*, all of the *basmala* is in its first letter, the Arabic *bā*’ (ب) and all of that is condensed in the dot underneath it. This statement closes with: ‘And I am that dot (*nuqṭa*).’¹⁴
6. The epic demonstrates divine intervention in human affairs, often including a hero or heroes, either divine or semidivine, pursuing a mission on behalf of their people. The hero is also frequently royal or quasi-royal and has a miraculous or near miraculous birth. The hero is also commanded by a divinity or an emissary from the divinity to assign the task or mission. Ultimately, the hero succeeds in protecting his culture, people, religion, and gods from enemies and oblivion.¹⁵
- 7 It includes and highlights themes of persecution and departure or exile from home, followed by a triumphal return. The triumphant hero frequently dispenses largesse or spoils to his community on whose behalf his epic contests or trials were engaged. The Qur’an includes numerous tales of persecution, exile, and rejection, most explicitly in its rehearsal of the struggles of pre-Muhammadan prophetic or pious figures. Such themes are manifest in the details of Muhammad and his community as seen in the extra-Qur’anic *Sīra* literature.
- 8 The epic makes use of epic epithets, similes, and figures. In the Qur’an, these features take the form of multiple divine names and attributes, names assigned to various classes of people, the good and the bad, as well as the frequent repetition of idiomatic phrases, for example, “life of the world,” “if only they knew,” “between heaven and earth,” and so on.
- 9 An epic is characterized by long speeches. The Qur’an *is* a long speech.
- 10 It is revealed before or for an audience. In other contexts, this would qualify as performance.

Numerous other factors are found in epics across all cultural and geographic boundaries, and numerous other epic features may be seen to apply to the Qur’an. We have listed ten here in the interest of brevity. The interested reader may consider the other elements of epic literature compared with cognate features of the Qur’an.¹⁶ Scholars agree that identity is a major concern of the epic, applied to both friends and enemies, “us and them.” As such, epics provide a people with a sense of who they are. The Qur’anic epic represents an important shift in the history of the epic because it asserts that all humanity is the subject of the epic rather than this or that comparatively limited “ethnic” group

or religious community. The beginning of history in the Qur'an is not creation but rather the summoning of *all* humanity to spiritual life in the famous primordial scene recounted at Q 7:172–174 (previously quoted), when all of humanity were gathered – in peace – in the presence of the Lord. This scene, universally understood to have occurred before creation, before the existence of what we now know as time and place, asserts that there is no chosen people, that all “the progeny of Adam” (*bani Ādam*) are related to one another and share the same status as *marbūb* or “servants” of the one true God. Subsequent time and history are seen as a way of engaging the deepest realities of soul so that they may return, in obedience to the covenant, to that first moment with intensified love, knowledge and being, along the lines of Eliot’s (d. 1965) famous lines in the *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.¹⁷

Most importantly, the Qur'anic epic is the epic of humanity as such, and as such, it critiques all other epics for being parochial, nationalistic, and limited. The oath taken by God during the making of the primordial covenant is so that at the end of the journey none would be able to claim ignorance of their reality, their purpose, the covenant, and their duty of obedience to the law of God. So the epic task or journey of the Qur'an is to establish the knowledge and awareness of the oneness of humanity and the inculcation of civilized and civilizing behavior that will enable the wide variety of human societies to live in peace. This is indicated quite unambiguously throughout the Qur'an and in the self-identity of the early Muslim community who were quite pleased to distinguish their time in contradistinction to that of the Age of “Ignorance” (*jāhiliyya*), where ignorance bespeaks not merely a lack of information but a lack of wisdom and such essentials of civilization as compassion, justice, patience, forgiveness, generosity (incidentally, all divine attributes in the Qur'an to be emulated by believers), to name only a few. The epic journey from ignorance to knowledge then leads us to equate the word Islam, however much it may from a philological point of view indicate submission, precisely with enlightenment.

Qur'an as Apocalypse

All of the Qur'an is an apocalypse and not merely only those so-called apocalyptic “hymnic” suras that were the earliest revelations. In this we have no choice if we attend responsibly to the meaning of the original Greek word *apokalypsis*: “disclosure,” “revelation,” “unveiling.” Indeed, it is this event that is at the heart of every Qur'anic utterance. The reality of revelation is the Qur'an's main theme and purpose. It is the main event of its narrative, the most important character in the drama. This distinctive feature whereby the book becomes its own subject or hero is something we typically consider a defining mark of literary modernism in “the West.” One of the ways this is accomplished is through the intertwining of epic and apocalypse. Epic bespeaks the stability and conservatism of a culture, while apocalypse bespeaks radical irruptions and crises in the same culture. The genre of apocalypse has been the center of a great deal of scholarly activity over the last 50 years, virtually none of it to do with the Qur'an, to the impoverishment of both Qur'anic and apocalyptic scholarship.

As is the case with the epic dimension of the Qur'an, the apocalyptic dimension may be traced with reliability by nonetheless relying upon the results of much of this scholarship. So a catalogue of attributes and literary features has been distinguished as being consistently represented in apocalyptic literatures of many different languages and cultures. Due to limitations of space, we can only

mention a few of these here. According to the literature, an apocalypse is characterized by thematic concern with:

- 1 *Cosmogony/creation*: In the Qur'an, God is repeatedly described as the sole creator of the universe and all that is in it.
- 2 *Primordial events*: The most central of these is the Day of the Covenant previously mentioned.
- 3 *Recollection of the past*: The Qur'an frequently asks the reader to recall the histories of long vanished communities, the stories of the persecution, and the history of prophets and messenger and to recall the duty owed to God and His messenger.
- 4 *Persecution*: The Qur'an is full of stories of the persecution of the prophets and the righteous.
- 5 *Eschatological upheavals*: The Qur'an is deeply concerned with the coming of the Hour of Judgment or the time of a great catastrophe. Also, the day of resurrection is a characteristic Qur'anic theme.
- 6 *Judgment/destruction of the wicked/the world*.
- 7 *Resurrection*.
- 8 *Angels and demons*: The Qur'an frequently refers to angels and other supernatural or invisible entities who may influence individuals' behavior.
- 9 *Ambiguity/multivocality*: The history of Qur'an "commentary" (*tafsīr*) clearly shows that passages of the Qur'an are not always understood in the same way by every reader.
- 10 *Illocution*: This is a technical term meaning words that demand some kind of action: commands, instructions.
- 11 *Glory motif*: Glory may be considered a central topic of the Qur'an, first encountered in all its splendor in the Light Verse (Q 24:35) but may be thought to circulate throughout the entire book.
- 12 *Aurality*: The Qur'an is meant to be heard, not just read.
- 13 *Cultural hybridism*: Scholars of the Qur'an from the very earliest times have noted that numerous cultures have contributed words and ideas to the Qur'an. This is one of the reasons it was recognized and accepted by such a wide variety of humanity in the initial days of its spread throughout the world.
- 14 *Multiple voices*: It is not always absolutely clear who is speaking: God, Muhammad the Messenger, Muhammad the citizen of Mecca, this or that particular character or angel. And when it is clear, it is also clear that the Qur'an indeed presents a "symphony" of various voices.
- 15 *Periodization of time and history*: The Qur'an is certain that history is affected by prophecy and revelation. The various religions are presented as punctuating history from the beginning of time until the present.
- 16 *Prevailing concern with diametric opposites (enantiodromia)*: It has been observed that the Qur'an is full of oppositions: good≠bad, faith≠disbelief, justice≠injustice, to name only three of dozens of possibilities. The concern with dualities and oppositions helps to highlight the importance of oneness in the Qur'an and also to provide a stream of coherence from beginning to end.¹⁸
- 17 *An otherworldly revelator*: The angel Gabriel.
- 18 *Truth*.
- 19 *Closure*. Another word for this is certitude, a major theme of the Qur'an.
- 20 *Revelation*.

This last item is, of course, what has given a name to the genre. One should beware that some elements are represented more fully and frequently than others, e.g., revelation, judgment, the glory motif, multiplicity of voices. But the obvious fact that so many of these represent what most of us would deem distinguishing features of the Qur'an and the fact that one can find several other apocalyptic features in the Qur'an that have not been listed here due to space constraints should allow

us to conclude – at the very least – that the Qur'an is susceptible of being mistaken for an apocalypse and may be expected to speak particularly saliently to something described as an “apocalyptic imagination.”¹⁹

Catalogues of elements such as the foregoing have been criticized in the literature for being too abstract, schematic, and imprecise, and it has been argued that a study of apocalypse should take into consideration three interlocking spheres of inquiry: genre, eschatology, and social movement. This will generally reveal that an apocalyptic text speaks of apocalyptic eschatology in the service of an apocalyptic social (religious) movement along the lines of giving comfort to the persecuted and assuring this beleaguered community that in time there will be a great reversal of fortune in which the present enemies will be defeated and the persecuted community will emerge triumphant.²⁰ It seems that here again we are inexorably led to the original setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the Qur'anic revelation, its major themes, and the social and political history of the community of the Qur'an. Furthermore, when we include a consideration of typological figuration, we cannot help but discern a process whereby a population addressed by a rhymed discourse in the most stately and weighty of tonalities and accents, is led to see itself as a divine remnant charged with the gravest and most pressing of historical divine imperatives.

Typological Figuration

Typological figuration is that extraordinarily powerful literary device which renders time and history an illusion or at least not as ineluctably unidirectional and absolute as we would otherwise tend to think. It is also a very special kind of repetition which assumes that the original type has not really ceased but has remained alive and effective even though it may appear that its time has passed.²¹ Its central importance, with the regard to the Bible, has been at home in religious studies ever since Goppelt published his epoch-making book in 1939.²² As Michael Zwettler demonstrated some years ago, it is a distinguishing feature of the Qur'an where it is every bit as central to meaning generation as it is in the Bible. Through typological figuration in the Bible, Jesus is identified as the Hebrew Bible's Lamb of God, Suffering Servant, and second Adam. The ordeal of Jonah in the whale and his rescue functions as a typological prophecy of the resurrection of Jesus after the crucifixion. Typological figuration's extraordinary imaginative and hermeneutic power is at work when, through epic poetry, Augustus, as antitype, is *both* Romulus and Aeneas *redivivus*, the twin types bespeaking his otherwise unimaginably high status and power. In the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad is the “return” of all previous prophets and especially – though certainly not exclusively – Joseph (see later in the chapter). His brotherhood and identity are not that of the poets but rather of those whose inspiration comes directly from the one true God. This is why the Qur'an is not poetry: a poet did not compose it. It is a revelation that relies upon the literary structures known to its audience, many of which are poetic. This is in line with the Qur'anic principle that a prophet speaks to his people in their own language (Q 14:4). Typological figuration also functions powerfully in the Qur'an when its audience, through the combined – or “enfuged” – powers of epic and the extraordinary intensity of apocalypse, are led to identify themselves with the recipients of previous divine messages and to identify those who would reject and persecute them with the enemies of divine oneness who have appeared from time to time in every human community (Q 10:47) from the very beginning.

Frye's words are to the point:

Typology is a figure of speech that moves in time: the type exists in the past and the antitype in the present, or the type exists in the present and the antitype in the future. What typology really is as a mode of thought, what it both assumes and leads to, is a theory of history, or more accurately of historical process: the assumption that there is some meaning

and point to history, and sooner or later some events will occur which will indicate what that point is, and so become an antitype of what has happened previously.²³

Typological thinking is distinct from causal thinking and infinitely more persuasive. It reverses the temporal order of causality, therefore demonstrating its power over time and causing us to have the illuminative experience that what appears to be new is actually – and simultaneously – very old. Causality depends on reason and says “the past is all that we genuinely . . . know.” Typology depends on “faith, hope, and vision” and “points to future events that are often thought of as transcending time.” It has been described as “a revolutionary form of thought and rhetoric.”²⁴ When the Qur’an evokes typological thinking, as for example when all humanity is presented as the antitype of the original audience that took part in the day of the covenant at Q 7:17–3, when all were gathered in peace and mutual recognition in the presence of God, the spiritual or imaginative power is quite unparalleled. The covenant is renewed each time this act of remembrance is performed or deployed, and humanity’s true identity is kerygmatically revealed.²⁵ Also, time disappears. Joyce’s “Nightmare of History” vanishes, and the true responsibility and vocation (arguably, the Qur’anic *ḍīn*, frequently though inadequately translated as “religion”) of being human are brought into focus. The Day of the Covenant is only one – perhaps ultimately the most persuasive, powerful, and characteristic of the Qur’anic kerygma – but others abound, as mentioned, including the very dramatic typological identification of the Prophet Muhammad with Joseph and his followers with Joseph’s reunited family in sura 12,²⁶ as well as the “typological confusion” in encountering the two Maryams in the Qur’an, first clarified by Northrop Frye himself.²⁷ As a focus for Qur’anic Studies, typological figuration has only just begun to attract the attention it so richly deserves. However, we now know enough to recognize its incalculable effect on the Qur’anic *da’iwa*, the faith and practice inspired by the Qur’an from earliest times until today.

Conclusion: Diegesis Becomes Mimesis

This vision is brought out largely in terms of the experience of an individual man [Muhammad] and of the entire community about him, an experience dominated in turn by the challenge of the very Qur’an which is its commentary, an experience, moreover, which – both during the Qur’anic revelations and afterward – was marked by a unique historical success.

Marshall Hodgson²⁸

The power and glory of the Qur’anic kerygma are enhanced by several factors. Of those indicated by Hodgson, perhaps the most important is the language, what he has called “The exalted effect . . . aided by an effective use of language, which lends an untranslatable dignity even to quite ordinary ideas, so that the phrases seem to take on a more general reference.” To drive the point home, he continues, “much of real substance is lost when the thought is cast into less noble rhythms in another tongue.” Our discussion here has largely ignored this more purely linguistic – *cum* – musically compelling feature of the Qur’anic Arabic. However, when the nearly universally attested power of that instrument is considered in light of the various structures of meaning generation and poetic order, we have attempted to sketch here so briefly, then the extraordinarily compelling power of the “total vision” (cf. *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wagner’s famous “Total artwork”) is more readily imagined and grasped.

We have not discussed another important element of the Qur’an’s “text grammar,” namely the constant interplay of a vast field of interlocking symmetries, dualities, and oppositions from the beginning of the text to the end, what was previously referred to with the unusual word

“enantiodromia.” Among other things, such a feature supplies an endless stream of continuity and coherence where it may otherwise be difficult to discern. And it sets up a master duality along the lines of: duality≠oneness. Thus whenever a duality is encountered, the “Qur’alized consciousness” instantly reaches out for the utterly transcendent, supra-numeric divine oneness and unicity the Prophet Muhammad was chosen to preach to his community, namely humanity.²⁹

Hodgson also alluded to another feature that we must draw attention, if only briefly and inadequately, in closing. When he said “almost every element which goes to make up its message is somehow present in any given passage,” he in fact identified a key feature of the Qur’anic method and purpose. Norman Brown, following Hodgson, said the same thing in a slightly different way in speaking of what he called the Qur’an’s “all-at-onceness” – though he used the classical term *totum simul*:

The apocalyptic style [of the Qur’an] is *totum simul*, simultaneous totality; the whole in every part. . . . It does not matter in what order you read the Qur’an; it is all there all the time; and it is supposed to be there all the time in your mind or at the back of your mind, memorized and available for appropriate quotation and collage into your conversation or your writing or your action.³⁰

Such a structure is in perfect harmony with physical reality wherein the least feature or element is teaming with the same life found at the source, circumference, substance, and every atom of the cosmos. It is, moreover, in perfect harmony with the Qur’anic “theory’ of signs, mentioned earlier where we quoted the central relevant Qur’anic verse, Q 41:53.

Thus, nature and the self are “read” and “heard” as collections of miraculous, kerygmatic, theophanic signs. With the Qur’an as master or controlling composition, these other two “books” (of nature and self) engage the believers’ sensorium with compelling sonorities and rhythms that characterize the paradigmatic revelation, the Qur’an. The literary beauty and meaning of the Qur’an³¹ conditions the consciousness to behold an analogous beauty and meaning in the realms of nature and in the souls. The Qur’an is not merely a book of doctrine, dogma, or information, it is rather a verbal icon with which the believer experiences precisely communion with the divine creative energy of the cosmos. The sense of intensity and engagement is of the type that Plotinus (d. circa 270 CE) referred to when he described attaining the truth: it is as when you are reading and you forget you are reading.³² Interpenetration is the word Frye used to symbolize the awareness of the interconnectedness of all things and the absorption or radiation of consciousness with that apperception.³³ Or when Eliot speaks of the deeper music:

Or music heard so deeply
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
 While the music lasts.³⁴

With the mention of music, one cannot forbear turning again to Northrop Frye whose work on the Bible has opened so many doors of perception for the study of the Qur’an’s “literary structures of religious meaning”.³⁵

Once a verbal structure is read, and reread often enough to be possessed, it “freezes.” It turns into a unity in which all parts exist at once, which we can then examine like a picture, without regard to the specific movement of the narrative. We may compare it to the study of a music score, where we can turn to any part without regard to sequential performance.³⁶

Each element of the icon participates in the whole, so wherever one looks, one encounters a door to transcendence and a closer experience to divine oneness. The apocalyptic, revelational energy enlivens every letter of the Qur'an, whether it be legal prescription, calendrical principle, relations between family members, prayers, prophecies, prophetic visions, and, one might say, even the spaces in between. Of course, there are moments of extraordinary intensity: the Light Verse (Q 24:35), the Throne Verse (Q 2:255), the Sura of the Night of Power (Q 97), and many others, especially those early revelations with their poetic intensity and eschatological tension. As Constance E. Padwick (d. 1968) said many years ago: "[T]hese are not mere letters or mere words. They are the twigs of the burning bush, aflame with God."³⁷ This unique literary phenomenon employs the very familiar solemnity and vastness of the epic with the almost pointillistic intensity of apocalypse to such a degree that at times the roles are blurred and even reversed: epic becomes apocalypse and apocalypse becomes epic.

The discovery of "Semitic logic," ring composition, and chiasmus in the Qur'an add to our understanding of Qur'anic interconnectedness and literary unity. Briefly, these three terms indicate that the "narratological" phenomenon of the main point of a work or discourse is found at its center and not at its end, a feature long recognized to be at work in antique literatures both oral and written. A splendid example of how the Qur'an conforms to this method is fully elucidated in Cuypers's masterful, *The Banquet*.³⁸ For Islamic belief, this scientific advance also enhances the perception of cosmic interconnectedness, parallel to the Qur'anic theory of signs. The cosmic "book" (i.e., the cosmos) reflects the Qur'anic book. Both enhance and provide keys to the book of the individual spiritual reality. The greatness, the monumentality of the Qur'an is a reflection of its epic élan and form. Incidentally, it also answers the perennial question of why the *muṣḥaf* is arranged in such a way, the oldest suras last, the more recent and longer ones first.³⁹ And why this is all introduced with a typically epic *praepositio* in the form of a prayer for guidance and summary of the scope of the epic. Thus the monumentality and the gravitas, the urgency and intensity, the rareness (not absence) of humor also acquire form and content in the lives of the believers and readers, in their cultures and individual wayfaring.

Finally, we must describe, however cursorily, the way in which we are to understand the preceding assertion by Hodgson when he says that the experience of the community and the individual in fact become commentary on the Qur'an, how diegesis becomes mimesis not only in the preaching of the Prophet Muḥammad but in the life of the Islamic world: the Qur'an *becomes* history now understood as the epic of the human race. This centers on another literary element, known in Arabic as *ḥikāya*, which has been translated as "imitation," "story," and "mimesis." Fifty or so years or so ago, Henry Corbin wrote of the mystical phenomenon whereby the reader of a poem *becomes* the very protagonist of the poem through identifying with the heroics presented. Corbin called this a move from the heroic to the mystical.⁴⁰ Though he did not mention it, the very same process, through especially typological figuration as previously discussed, occurs in the reading and embodiment of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the narrative, the story – *al-maḥkī 'anhu* – and the reader/believer, who was, don't forget, present at the primordial covenant, is *al-ḥākī*, the relater of the tale. Diegesis (*khābar*) becomes mimesis (*ḥikāya*). The epic dignity of the Muslim is affirmed; history is understood, and love for God and the Prophet Muhammad is paradoxically made reasonable through a literary composition that is more than literature. The very act of reading and understanding is heroic.

Notes

- 1 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), xvi, 29–30, 231.
- 2 Ibid., 55; Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible as Literature* (Markham, Ontario: Viking, 1990); and a third short book – something of a summary of the two earlier ones and published

- shortly after Frye died: *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991).
- 3 Marshall G.S. Hodgson, "A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frame-Work for Religious Life," *Dio- genes* 8 no. 32 (December 1960): 49–74; excerpt from 61–63.
 - 4 When two quite different melodies are skillfully played together, previously unknown similarities between the two are revealed. This is one of the features of the musical form, the fugue. The power and effectiveness of the fugue challenges "mere" logic, which insists that two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Epic and apocalypse, frequently understood to be at cross-purposes, are combined in the Qur'an and harmonized in the way that a fugue combines and synchronizes two sometimes opposite musical movements or ideas.
 - 5 The clearest example of typological figuration in the Qur'an occurs when the reader identifies the prophet Muhammad, upon whom be God's blessing and peace, as having the same character, mission, and spiritual substance as all of the other prophets and messengers mentioned in the Qur'an as distinct from, say, the poets referred to in the Qur'an. See Michael Zwettler, "Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of the Poets and the Qur'anic Foundations of Prophetic Authority," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James L. Kugel (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75–119.
 - 6 "Communities" means here those who accept the prophet and have faith in the message given by the prophet. Obviously, the Qur'an speaks repeatedly and at length about the fate of those communities who rejected the prophets God had sent to them.
 - 7 Such hardships and tests are prominent features of the epic regardless of what culture it is speaking about or what language it is composed in. The technical term, from the Greek, for this literary feature is *peripeteia*, "a sudden reversal of fortune."
 - 8 A useful reference for this topic, sometimes called "narratology," is the recent book (which does not mention the Qur'an) by Kent Puckett, *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
 - 9 *Al-Rahmān, al-Rahīm* are the two most frequent names of God in the Qur'an usually translated, respectively as "The Most Merciful" and "The Most Compassionate." They are derived from the Arabic triliteral root *r-ḥ-m*, from which the Arabic word for "womb," *rahīm*, is also derived. As such, these two words carry implications of motherhood and unconditional love, motherhood's primary feature. The root itself occurs in various derivations 339 times in the Qur'an, with *al-Rahmān* in 57 instances and *al-Rahīm* 116. These two words are also noteworthy as the pair of divine names used in the opening invocation – known as the *basmala* – for 113 of the 114 suras of the Qur'an.
 - 10 On epic in general, both ancient and modern, see John Miles Foley, ed., *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) and Margaret Beissinger, et al., eds., *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). A very useful brief discussion is S.V. Revard and J.K. Newman, "Epic: I. History and II. Theory," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. A. Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 361–375.
 - 11 Richard P. Martin, "Epic as Genre," in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 9–19, quotation from 18.
 - 12 Unless otherwise indicated, when discussing the order of the Qur'an, the final edited order is assumed. As is well known, the Islamic tradition insists that the order of the Qur'an in use by believers, the so-called *muṣḥaf*, is almost perfectly opposite to the chronological order in which the Qur'an was revealed. That sequence is referred to by one of the Qur'anic words for the process of revelation namely, *tanzīl*.
 - 13 English translations of the Qur'an are from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. S.H. Nasr et al. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015).
 - 14 Such points not only to the centrality of the prophet/messenger or imam but also alludes to the relevance of Brown's observation regarding the *totum simul* previously mentioned. In calligraphy especially, it is understood that the dot "circulates" through all of the other letters indicating that all of the Qur'an is present in every part.
 - 15 Note the etymological root of the originally Greek word *hero* is "protector."
 - 16 Todd Lawson, *Quran, Epic and Apocalypse* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), 1–26.
 - 17 T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 39: Little Gidding, part v, ll. 26–29.
 - 18 Todd Lawson, *Quran, Epic and Apocalypse* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 76–93.
 - 19 The title of John J. Collins' influential book, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
 - 20 Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 429–433.

- 21 “It would perhaps be difficult to prove completely the axiom that objects do not cease to exist when we have stopped looking at them. Yet it is hard to see how we could maintain a consistent sense of reality without assuming it, and everyone does so assume it in practice and would even assert it as the first article of common sense. For some reason it is more difficult to understand that events do not necessarily cease to exist when we have stopped experiencing them, and those who would assert, as an equally obvious fact, that all things do not dissolve in time any more than they do in space are very rare.” Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 247.
- 22 Leonard Goppelt, Donald H. Madvig, and E. Earle Ellis, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002). Typological figuration would soon attract the attention of literary scholars such as Erich Auerbach whose similarly epoch-making work, *Figura* (see bibliography) would appear in 1938.
- 23 Frye, *The Great Code*, 80–81.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 25 Todd Lawson, “The Mythic Substrate of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Immutable Entities (*al-a‘yān al-thābita*),” *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136, no. 4 (December 2016): 817–818.
- 26 This is argued in Anthony Johns, “Joseph in the Qur’ān: Dramatic Dialogue, Human Emotion, and Prophetic Wisdom,” *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981): 29–55.
- 27 Frye points out that “Christian commentators” of the Qur’an have failed to appreciate the deeper point made by the Qur’an in Sura 19 in identifying (not confusing) Mary mother of Jesus with Maryam of the Hebrew Bible. Frye insists that the Qur’an is not confused here but “makes good sense” because both “Maryams” are of the same literary-spiritual value and reality. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 172; Lawson, *The Quran*, 57–75; 90–93. See also Michael Zwettler for a masterful discussion of typological figuration at work in the sura of the Poets (Q 26, *al-Shu‘arā*). On the literary function of the Qur’an’s Maryam, see now Hosn Abboud, *Mary in the Qur’an: A Literary Reading* (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).
- 28 Marshall G.S. Hodgson, “A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frame-Work for Religious Life,” *Dio- genes* 8, no. 32 (December 1960): 62.
- 29 This is discussed at length in Todd Lawson, *The Quran, Epic and Apocalypse* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 76–93.
- 30 Norman O. Brown, “The Apocalypse of Islam,” *Social Text* 8 (1983): 167–168.
- 31 Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Qur’an*, translated by Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).
- 32 Elmer O’Brien (trans.), *The Essential Plotinus: Representative Treatises from the Enneads* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), 30.
- 33 Northrop Frye, GC, 168. For a study of this in Frye and its Zen provenance, see Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 33–60.
- 34 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 27; Dry Salvages, pt. 5, ll. 27–29.
- 35 This is the title of Issa Boullata’s important, pioneering book: *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000).
- 36 Frye, *The Great Code*, 62–63.
- 37 Constance Evelyn Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use* (London: SPCK, 1961), 19.
- 38 Michel Cuyppers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sūra of the Qur’an* (Miami, FL: Convivium, 2009). See also Michel Cuyppers, *The Composition of the Qur’an: Rhetorical Analysis* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). Much of Cuyppers’s invaluable work and those seminal insights deriving from it are summarized in Carl W. Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’an: A New Guide with Select Translations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
- 39 Todd Lawson, *The Quran, Epic and Apocalypse* (London: Oneworld, 2017).
- 40 Henry Corbin, “De l’Épopée héroïque à l’Épopée mystique,” in *Face de Dieu, Face de l’homme: Herméneutique et Soufisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 163–235, 234. The topic of *hikaya* is interestingly – though insufficiently – taken up in Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 169, 184, 212, 231, 272–274, and 314. See also Todd Lawson, “Review of Navid Kermani,” *God Is Beautiful, Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3.1 (September 2016): 853–856.