

# The Qur'ān in Context

Historical and Literary Investigations into the  
Qur'ānic Milieu

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THE RELEVANCE OF EARLY ARABIC POETRY FOR  
QUR'ANIC STUDIES INCLUDING OBSERVATIONS ON *KULL*  
AND ON Q 22:27, 26:225, AND 52:31

Thomas Bauer

1. *Tunnel Vision—Or the Current State of Affairs*

"Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments" ("Texts from the World of the Old Testament") is a publication series that is well-known to virtually every Orientalist and Old Testament scholar. Designed to offer a better understanding of the Hebrew Bible, this series provides translations of texts contemporary with the Hebrew Bible from Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, from South Arabia, Persia, and other regions of the Ancient Middle East; and in spite of its wide range of cultural representations, it succeeds admirably. By contrast, the situation regarding research into the world of the Qur'an is quite different. To be sure, Christian sources about early Islam have been investigated to some degree, and an attempt has even been made to write about the early history of Islam based on these sources alone. But even so, the history of the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East during the time of the Prophet is relatively poorly researched. For example, there is little research on the Sasanid Empire, which was contemporary with the revelation of the Qur'an. Or, even worse, on the Lakhmid rulers, vassals of the Sasanids, and their pro-Byzantine counterpart, the Ghassanids. Indeed, the standard reference texts about the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids date back to 1887 (Th. Nöldeke, *Die Ghassānischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafna's*) and 1899 (G. Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Ḥīra*)!<sup>1</sup> It is hard not to be discouraged by the fact that, in comparison to Hebrew Studies, even today, Nöldeke and Rothstein still serve as standard reference works. Given the degree to which Western scholars value a critical historical approach, it seems odd that so much of

<sup>1</sup> Recently, Isabel Toral Niehoff has submitted a *Habilitationsschrift* on al-Ḥīra at the Free University of Berlin. Since it is not yet available in print, cf. her contribution to this volume for a preliminary survey of some of her results.

contemporary research into the history of the Qur'an seems to be able to get by without any real or serious critical consideration of the texts contemporary with it.

This is all the more remarkable since in Qur'anic studies, it is possible to explore the "world" of the holy text quite thoroughly and even more deeply than it is feasible in Old Testament studies. There exist hundreds of elaborate and lengthy literary texts which were *au courant* at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, either contemporary with it or immediately preceding or following it. Such texts not only tell us much about the political and literary environment of the Qur'an, they also tell us much about the linguistic and cultural horizons of those who were the first to hear the recitations of the Qur'an. Almost perversely, Qur'anic scholars do not show much enthusiasm about the existence of this literature. Again the situation in biblical studies is remarkably different. Just think of the excitement and enthusiasm with which the discovery of Ugaritic texts was first met, when it was finally possible for Old Testament scholars to hold these ancient Canaanite texts in their hands and decipher them. By contrast, scholars of the Qur'an have a far more impressive corpus of contemporary texts to work with—yet appear to do little more than shrug their shoulders at these riches. Although no Hebrew from ancient times would ever have heard the Ugaritic Baal hymn, it is entirely probable that many who first heard the Qur'an would also have been familiar with the Mu'allāqa of Ṭarafa. For Arabic exegetes of the Qur'an in the millennium after the emergence of the science of study of the Qur'an, it would have been a matter of course to know about such texts. For the greater percentage of modern scholars today, such an expanded knowledge appears to be virtually non-existent.

Rather than offering any genuine scientific reason for the lack of interest in Arabic poetry contemporary with the Qur'an, Qur'an scholars tend to belittle this admittedly somewhat bulky mass of literature as irrelevant—if they think it even necessary to justify their lack of attention at all. Arguments against such a widening of the scope of research, often unstated but implied, tend to fall into one or more of three categories: 1) that the Qur'an can and should be understood on its own terms alone; 2) that the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry is doubtful; and/or 3) that poetry as literature has little relevance for religious texts.

The principle that one should understand the Qur'an in and of itself was more staunchly advocated in Rudi Paret's time than it is

today. By modern literary, hermeneutical, and text critical standards, such a view now seems hopelessly antiquated, even more so because the Qur'an is a text that refers repeatedly to other texts—including, among others, references to poets. Although it is important to investigate the Qur'an on the basis of its internal and intratextual connections, this should not be done at the expense of taking into consideration its intertextual dimension as well. Such a cultural solipsism cannot be defended in the face of intertextual and culturally contextual research and the advances in understanding that have resulted from it.

The claim that early Arabic poetry is a fabrication from the early Islamic period (Margoliouth, Ṭahā Ḥusayn) is outdated. The most recent proponent of this hypothesis is of course Christoph Luxenberg, who, without presenting any evidence whatsoever, accused Theodor Nöldeke of "having too much respect for the exaggerated age assigned to so-called early Arabic poetry."<sup>2</sup> Now it is indeed true that the corpus of early Arabic poetry is, in fact, among the most controversial subjects in the field of Arabic studies (surpassed only by the controversies surrounding the Qur'an).<sup>3</sup> Yet specialists in the field no longer appear haunted by questions of authenticity but rather are interested in those avenues of inquiry that are typically pursued by other literary scholars, no matter what the language or origin of the respective body of texts. They seek, for example, to reconstruct the patterns of literary communication that were existent in pre- and early Islamic time. Such scholars no longer see early Arabic poetry as a disorderly corpus of texts filled with a strange and difficult lexicon, but rather as a body of texts whose internal structure has become more and more transparent over time. Different literary periods, each with its own developments, have been discerned and established; schools of thought and influences learned; and a complex picture—one that is growing ever more complex as research continues its explorations—has been emerging regarding the ways in which pre- and early Islamic society has used this literature for communicative purposes. But the picture is still dismally incomplete—a state of affairs that is for the most part due to the lack of serious scholars in the field.

<sup>2</sup> Luxenberg, *Syro-aramäische Lesart*, 210 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Montgomery, *Qasidah*, 1: "Within the domain of Classical Arabic literature, only the Qur'an has generated so much controversy and disagreement."

The complexity of the corpus puts to rest any notions of falsity, for in order to create such an extensive literature with its own development over a considerable time span, it would not have been enough to falsify single poems, but it would have been necessary to invent a whole history of literature. It can be shown that the chronological frame that is given by the early philologists can be corroborated by modern methods, which, of course, were not available to early Arabic scholars. Thus, the far more reasonable hypothesis is that a large part of the artistically elaborated poems is genuine and was composed by exactly those poets to whom they were attributed, and that these poets lived roughly in the period which early Arabic philologists claimed they lived in. There will always be exceptions and special cases, of course. One must be aware of controversial poets such as Umayya ibn Abī ṣ-Ṣalt, poorly attested poems that fall outside the canon, poorly attested poets, and even political verse, which is fairly easy to imitate, etc. But these kinds of potential forgeries can be detected with sound philological methods. Such debates will of course continue to occupy scholars for some time, but this does not diminish the value of poetry for understanding the environment of the Qur'an.

The third argument that ancient Arabic poetry has little relevance for students of the Qur'an is founded on the (mistaken) belief that such poetry can contribute little, if any, to understanding the Qur'an as a religious text. Because non-Qur'anic literature is indeed sparse in its religious references, it is tempting to give credence to this argument. And, in fact, the few pagan, Christian or Jewish references in early Arabic poetry that have been unearthed thus far do not contribute much to our understanding of the contemporary background of the Qur'an. However, the problem is not so much one inherent in the corpus of poetry, as it is the way in which essential and insightful questions have been framed (or perhaps, more accurately, not been framed). Until recently, those questions that attempt to extract theological information from non-Qur'anic literature were privileged, and when answers were not forthcoming, this literary corpus was deemed useless as a source of information for the early history of Islam. Early Arabic literature will prove, however, to be a far more productive source for the cultural background at the time of the Prophet if it is approached using current literary and cultural methods of inquiry appropriate to the sources at hand. An inquiry into cultural patterns, attitudes and values, beliefs, and mores as displayed in poetry, on the one hand, and in the Qur'an, on the other, would yield valuable

insights. One could start with a single concept, such as *ṣabr*, and see what a comparison of this concept in both the Qur'an and in poetry would yield. Other concepts, such as virtue, manliness, ideas about death and sexuality, expression of feelings such as fear, sorrow, and joy: all of these would be appropriate themes to explore both groups of texts. Inquiries such as these would without doubt more effectively demonstrate the "originality of the Qur'an"<sup>4</sup> than any singular or one-sided approach (such as questions limited to a history-of-religions approach), especially when the Qur'an's contrast not only to pre-Islamic monotheism but also to the make-up of the contemporary Arabic world is taken into account. Although the kind of research pioneered by Georg Jacob and Werner Caskel<sup>5</sup> is still relevant today, there now exists not only a far larger corpus at our disposal, but also a more precise and insightful methodology, developed in such fields as literary studies, ethnology, historical anthropology, and the "history of mentalities" (*histoire des mentalités*). Such approaches have already been used quite successfully in Arabic Studies, even as they have been scarcely used with regard to the pre- and early Islamic period.<sup>6</sup>

But even in the long-established discipline of philology, there is still much work to be done. Again, investigations of concepts deriving from religion and the realm of religious meaning have been almost exclusively focused upon. While they are of course useful, they have led to an insular rather than to a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'an. One of the few exceptions is the work of Tilman Seidensticker on the verb *sawwama*, in which he was able to clarify fully the meaning of a Qur'anic expression by way of an explication of the use of this verb in early Arabic poetry.<sup>7</sup> In any case, as long as modern scholars continue to ignore the riches that lie before them in the corpus of pre- and early-Islamic poetry, then the more likely it is that people like Luxenberg will find a receptive and gullible audience easy to delude with scandalous claims.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the title of a well-known essay by Johann Fück: "Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten."

<sup>5</sup> Jacob, *Altarabisches Beduinenleben*; Caskel, *Schicksal*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Conermann and von Hees (eds.), *Islamwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*.

<sup>7</sup> Seidensticker, *Das Verbum sawwama*.

## 2. Negative Intertextuality

There is yet another reason why scholars of the Qur'an are deterred from looking more closely at contemporary literature. Even the briefest of examinations of the two bodies of texts reveals that they share little in common. So different are the Qur'an and contemporary poetic literature that one can hardly come up with a better example of difference if one tried. From their different ways of using language to their notable differences in content, hardly any similarities are to be found. This distinction is so marked that it might well seem virtually pointless to claim that Arabic poetry can make any serious contribution to an understanding of the Qur'an.

Almost, but not quite. For by now, it is clear that I intend exactly to do just that: to encourage an examination of poetry, however different it may be, in order to more fully understand the Qur'an. And it is precisely because of this difference that I believe these two sorts of texts can gain so much from a comparison. Poetry was well known and accepted as the most important medium of public discourse in pre-Islamic Arabia. Such discourse is mentioned several times in the Qur'an. The Prophet himself had to deal with poets and poetry repeatedly. He spoke about poetry, and he spoke to poets. Given this kind of emphasis on poetry, it is thus all the more astonishing that, unlike the comprehensive work done thus far on elements of Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an, there exists simply no corresponding attention to co-existing elements of pre- and early Islamic poetry. Although the differences between the two corpora are what strikes one first and most forcibly, it is precisely these differences that require examination and inquiry. And, above all, the question is "why?"—why should such profound differences exist, and what do they mean? To list a few here as a starting point, I offer the following:

1) Poetry and the Qur'an pursue quite different ends and thus deal with entirely different themes. Scarcely a theme found in the Qur'an would have been treated by the poets. The two corpora reflect a widely different worldview and thus pose essential human questions quite differently. Thus we should be made suspicious when parallels do appear, when for example an expression like *rayb al-manūn*, which belongs more to the world of poetry, surfaces in the Qur'an. I will come back to this point later on.

2) Meter and rhyme are the parameters which distinguish poetry from prose. Although the Qur'an displays several elements charac-

teristic of poetic style, it follows entirely other principles of construction than does pre- and early Islamic poetry. Most importantly, it does not use meter, and its rhyme follows different parameters than that of poetry. Because unrhymed prose was not known as a literary form in pre- and early Islamic Arabia, the Qur'an can be considered as an exact antithesis of poetry insofar as its form is concerned.

3) The stylistic devices used in poetry and in the Qur'an are complementary to each other. The two most important stylistic devices in Arabic poetry were a specific form of metonymy, on the one hand, and the simile, on the other.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, metaphors, parables, and allegory play a prominent role in the Qur'an, but play virtually no role in poetry.

4) Contemporary poets consciously sought to achieve an unusual and difficult diction. A poet was proud when his hearers were confused as a result of his difficult vocabulary. His verses were so convoluted in construction "that his obscure vocabulary brought the listeners to tears" (*yastabkī r-ruwāta gharībuhā*).<sup>9</sup> By contrast, if the lexicon of the Qur'an itself may be difficult to understand, this is not the case because it lacks a foundation in recognizable Arabic words but rather because so many words—including many non-Arabic loan words—had no counterpart in their contemporary context. It is thus possible that the Qur'an is said to be *mubīn* (Q 5:15, 6:59, 10:61, and elsewhere) because it hardly contains any *gharīb* expressions or idioms that were so typical of contemporary poetry.

5) Although a full study that compares the grammar of the Qur'an with that of poetry is still needed, some differences are immediately apparent. For example, I will elaborate a bit later on the concept of the "poetic *kull*," a construction that is exceedingly common in the poetry of the time, but appears only very seldom in the Qur'an.

What stands out from this list is the fact that the Qur'an is, in many ways, the complete antithesis of contemporary poetry. The Qur'an appears to be exactly what it was intended to be: a text styled in such a way as to achieve an effective public reception, but also to be as unlike poetry as possible; as different as it possibly could be and still be recognizable as a stylistically elevated text. Any attempt to make the language more like that of contemporary poetic expression would have blurred the differences between poetic and prophetic

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, vol. 1, 172–204.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bauer, "Muzarrids Qaside," 65.

speech. Too much similarity, and contemporary listeners might well have mistaken the text of the Qur'an for a poem, and a bad poem at that. On the other hand, a text that was too overtly different, too far removed from the literary conventions of the time, would have been out of reach for its audience. When one also considers that early Arabic poetry was well known to those also hearing the Qur'an, there can be no doubt that their impressions and reception of the Qur'an would have been considerably influenced by the contemporary conventions of poetry. If, under these conditions, the Qur'an were to have any effect on such an audience, it would have to achieve a delicate balance between two poles or extremes: to be close enough to poetry to be recognizable as a text on a high and aesthetic level, but different enough to be revelatory.

Yet it is also clear that poetry can play a role in our understanding of the Qur'an. Poetry provides us with an understanding of the parallels of words, expressions, stylistic devices, rhetorical and aesthetic strategies, and concepts that are found in the Qur'an. But more importantly, poetry also offers an understanding of those grammatical, rhetorical, and aesthetic phenomena that *are consciously avoided* in the Qur'an. Thus poetry provides us with a way of understanding some of the peculiarities of the Qur'an, as it seeks to achieve the reverse of poetry contemporary with its revelation, or a kind of negation of poetry. Thus one can speak of a *negative intertextuality*; that is, an avoidance of certain features, that has just as formative an influence on the shape of the text as would be the reverse, a similarity of certain features. A comparative examination of the Qur'an and the literature contemporary with it does not necessarily require starting with a word or phrase in the Qur'an and then asking where it is found in ancient Arabic literature. It is equally important—and perhaps more important—to do the reverse: to start with the latter and ask what of it *is not* found in the Qur'an.

### 3. *The Grammar of Kull (Q 22:27)*

Although I have just argued for a fundamental difference, a kind of negative intertextuality, between the Qur'an and its contemporary poetry, it is also equally true that, over and again, similarities emerge, as would be expected given that the first hearers of the revelation of the Qur'an were also expected to listen to and understand poetry—

thus the same hearers would have to have understood both revelation and poetic expression at that time, even as they were being converted to the revelations they were hearing for the first time. Thus we do have a kind of positive intertextuality. This typically manifests itself in the form of idioms, certain grammatical constructions, shared stylistic devices, and the like. Although such similarities may be few and far between, relatively speaking, they require special study precisely because of their unusualness.

A good example of what might be called a case of positive intertextuality can be found in verse Q 22:27, in which the use of *kull* requires an understanding of how this seemingly simple word was used in poetry:

وَأَذِّنْ فِي النَّاسِ بِالْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالًا وَعَلَى كُلِّ ضَامِرٍ يَأْتِينَ مِنْ كُلِّ فَجٍّ عَمِيقٍ

Rudi Paret has translated this verse as follows: "Und ruf unter den Menschen zur Wallfahrt auf, damit sie (entweder) zu Fuß zu dir kommen, oder (w. und) auf allerlei hageren (Kamelen reitend), die aus jedem tief eingeschnittenen Paßweg daherkommen!"

Pickthall's English translation goes as follows: "And proclaim unto mankind the Pilgrimage. They will come unto thee on foot and on every lean camel; they will come from every deep ravine."

Arberry's translation is nearly identical: "[...] and proclaim among men the Pilgrimage, and they shall come unto thee on foot and upon every lean beast, they shall come from every deep ravine."

The two English translations are marred by an obvious mistake: the subject of *ya'tina*, a verb in the feminine plural, cannot refer to "the men," but only to "the camels." Paret's translation is more correct, but still I would prefer a slight modification and subsequent translation as follows: "Kündige unter den Leuten die Pilgerfahrt an, damit sie zu Fuß oder auf lauter Mageren [d. h. Kamelen], die aus all den tief eingeschnittenen Bergpässen herauskommen, zu dir kommen," which would correspond in English to: "And proclaim among men the pilgrimage, so that they will come to thee on foot or on all those lean ones [i.e., camels] that come from out of all the deep ravines."

The main difference between my recommended translation here and Paret's translation revolves around the treatment of the word *kull* ("all," "every"), the grammar of which is more difficult than most translators of the Qur'an have assumed. Again, Arabic poetry can provide for a better understanding of this word, as will be shown.

However, it is first necessary to explore this particular expression, and particularly the way in which it is often translated—or mistranslated—in modern Western languages.

In virtually every textbook and grammar of Arabic, one can read that *kull* followed by a definite plural noun means “all,” whereas followed by an indefinite singular noun it means “each” or “every.” Thus *kullu l-buyūti* would mean “all houses,” *kullu baytin* would mean “every house” or “each house.”<sup>10</sup> A statement like this, however, does not explain why such a translation is preferable; it simply proposes a rule for translation. But what really is the difference between “alle Häuser / all houses” and “jedes Haus / every house”? Even in German and English the phrases are often interchangeable, and there are more than these two. Consider the following phrases: “Dogs that bark don’t bite,” “a dog that barks doesn’t bite,” “every dog that barks doesn’t bite,” “all dogs that bark don’t bite.” This is not the place for a more detailed discussion of the rules of “all, each, every” in English, German, and Arabic, but the example may suffice to show that the rules given in the textbooks are far from satisfying.

Although the putative explanation “*kull* + n. pl. def. = ‘all’; *kull* + n. sg. indef. = ‘each’ or ‘every’” is far from being a well-formulated grammatical rule, most translators of the Qur’an have followed it conscientiously, as the above examples show. But this explanation is not only unsatisfactory; as regards classical Arabic it is quite plainly wrong. Therefore, a typical classical Arabic phrase such as *wa-tafarraqa l-Muslimūna fī kulli wajhin*<sup>11</sup> cannot be translated as “and the Muslims were scattered in each direction.” Rather it should be translated as “and the Muslims were scattered in all directions.”

The circumstances become even clearer when we regard the form *kullu l-buyūti*, which, according to the above “rule” of the textbooks, would be the equivalent to “all houses” or, in German, to “alle Häuser.” If *kullu l-buyūti* were indeed the normal construction for saying “all houses,” it would occur thousands of times in classical Arabic texts. Yet this particular phrase is almost never to be found in classical Arabic literature. I could not find a single piece of evidence for *kull* + n. pl. def. meaning “all x” in either the entirety of the *Sīra* by Ibn Ishāq / Ibn Hishām or in all three volumes of al-Wāqidi’s *Maghāzī*,

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wright, *Grammar*, 2:204; Cantarino, *Syntax*, vol. 2, 126f.; WKAS, s.v. *kull*.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, 231, line -8; see also *ibid.*, 97/4, 235/-2, 283/7, 293/9, 299/-6, 321/-4, 332/-7, 338/7, 343/2, 345/-6, etc.

even though one might well claim that in German or English the word “all” would most certainly have been used. In those very few instances where *kull*, followed by the definite genitive plural, is attested in classical texts, it means “all kinds of x.” In early Arabic, as well as in the entirety of classical Arabic, and even today in the novels of Naguib Mahfuz, *kullu l-buyūti* means “all different kinds of tents/houses.”

A close reading of Arabic texts, therefore, shows that (1) *kull* + n. pl. def. (*kullu l-buyūti*) hardly ever occurs in ancient Arabic poetry, in the Qur’an, or even in classical prose texts; (2) that wherever *kull* + n. pl. def. does occur, its most obvious meaning is “all sorts of different x” rather than “all x”; (3) that, if *kullu l-buyūti* is not the classical Arabic equivalent of “all houses,” the rule of the textbooks, which formulates the difference between *kullu baytin* and *kullu l-buyūti*, is entirely wrong. Therefore, it is equally questionable that the best or even only correct translation of *kullu baytin* is “every house.” Instead, it is all too obvious that the phrase *kullu baytin* does not only serve as the equivalent of “every house,” but also takes the function of the English phrase “all houses.”<sup>12</sup>

To sum up: *kull* + n. sg. indef. can be translated not only as “every x” but also as “all x,” whereas *kull* + n. pl. def. would correspond to “all kinds of x.” Obviously, classical Arabic does not make the same distinction between “every x” or “all x” that English and German do.

This kind of careful attention to the usage of *kull* could have resulted, in and of itself, in many improvements in the translation of the Qur’an. It should have been observed, as a matter of course, that the purported usual or typical form for “all” hardly occurs at all in the Qur’an, just as it hardly occurs at all in poetic literature. In fact, it can be observed that the syntagm *kull* + n. def. pl. occurs only in the phrase *kullu th-thamarāti* (Q 2:266, 7:57, 13:3, 16:11.69, 47:15), where it clearly means “all kinds of fruit.” It should make us suspicious that the form that, according to the textbooks, is supposed to

<sup>12</sup> The reason why *kullu l-buyūti* came to be understood as “all houses” may have been the phrase *kullu n-nāsi*, which seems to have been used quite early in the sense of “all people” instead of *kullu insānin*, which is conspicuously rare. Perhaps *kullu n-nāsi* was easier to pronounce in the dialects in which initial *hamza* was elided, and, after all, there is no great difference between “all sorts of people in the town” and “all people in the town.” Note, however, that *kullu n-nāsi* does not occur in the Qur’an. One might also consider an analogy to the phrase *jami’ an-nās*.



be the regular classical Arabic equivalent for English "all" does not appear at all in the Qur'an with that meaning, and when it does appear, it means something different!

However, it is not my purpose to go into a lengthy discussion here about the differences between "every/each" and "all" in English and "jede/r/s" and "alle" in German. Suffice it to say that in many places where Paret and other translators have given the translation as "each" or "every," "all" would have been the more suitable choice. To mention but one example, that of Q 10:79. Following the textbook rule, German and English translators have: "Bringt mir jeden kenntnisreichen Zauberer (herbei)" (Paret), "Bring me every cunning sorcerer" (Arberry), or "Bring me every sorcerer well versed" (Yusuf Ali). Translations like these may seem to imply, however, that, out of a known group of magicians, only those who are especially learned or cunning should be brought. But that is not what is meant. It should rather be translated to mean, "Bring me all (learned) magicians!" That is, "bring me all magicians, for they all consider themselves learned." Therefore, a translation like "Bringt mir alle / all jene kenntnisreichen Zauberer," "bring me all / all those learned sorcerers" would be closer to the original meaning.

Additionally, the syntagm *kullu baytin* has more meanings, in addition to "every house" or "each house" or "all houses." In addition to universalizing the elements of a set, *kull* can also have a demonstrative function, i.e., to point to and define within a set those elements which are intended to be universalized. This demonstrative function can be seen quite clearly in the following verse from Labīd, speaking at the time of the Prophet:<sup>13</sup>

ولكن مالي غاله كل جفنة إذا حان وزد أسبكت بدموع

This verse is an example typical of the genre of "self praise" (*fakhr*), in which the poet presents himself as an embodiment of the pre-Islamic ideal of *murū'a*, or "manliness." The subject here deals with generosity that reaches the utmost level of a general potlatch. Islam opposed this self-destructive way of generosity and replaced it by a more moderate idea of charity.

A free paraphrase of the verse would be: When it is time again for people to go to "drink," i.e. to satisfy their needs, from the poet's

<sup>13</sup> Labīd, *Diwān*, 70, no. 10/5.

generosity, the poet offers them bowls full of camel meat, the fat of which flows over the brim of the bowls so that the bowls seem to shed tears. This is done in such a quantity that, metaphorically spoken, these bowls "destroy" all of the poet's camels. In this verse, the phrase *kullu jafnin* cannot be adequately translated by either "all bowls" or by "each bowl," given that bowls have not been mentioned before and so the referent would be unclear. There is no given set of bowls *all of which* have robbed the poet of his cattle, but the set of bowls in question is delimited and presented as being of a somewhat largish quantity at the same time that it is universalized by *kull*. *Kull* therefore carries out three distinct referential functions simultaneously: "there is a large quantity of bowls," "I am talking about *these* bowls," and "I am talking about the *whole set* of these bowls." In English and German, these functions cannot be conveyed by words like "all" and "every," which universalize a given set, but have little determinative value. The determiner has to be added as a separate word and we have to say something like "all the bowls," "all those bowls," or "all(e) die Schüsseln." In Arabic, instead, the function of the definite article or the demonstrative pronoun is already fulfilled by *kull*, which is the reason why the singular noun that is preceded by *kull* cannot take the article *al-* in addition. Thus it is reasonable to translate the above verse as follows:

But all those bowls that flowed over with tears (of fat) when it was time again to go to drink, have robbed me of my cattle.

Additionally, it is not necessary in German or in English to use "all" for *kull*. An alternative is to use a zero article before the noun or a predeterminer before the non-count noun. Thus it is possible to say "worry has made him old early," or "his worries have made him old early," or "all the worry/all of the worry has aged him while still young." But it is not possible to say "all worries have made him old early" or "every worry has made him old early." Just as in the above example, where one can say "all of the bowls" or "all those bowls" or even just "bowls" or "the bowls," but not "all bowls" or even "every bowl."

The construction *kullu baytin* can therefore be used in classical Arabic in a distributive sense (as English "each" or "every" or German "jede/r/s") or in a non-distributive sense (as English and German "all/alle"). It can refer to an already known set of elements, or it can define and determine this set by itself. *Kullu baytin* can therefore have

a number of different possible translations, among them: 1) each house; 2) all houses; 3) all (of) the houses / all those houses.

These insights thus offer the possibility for a better understanding of Q 22:27, as quoted above. In this verse, we heard that the pilgrims came “from *kull* deep ravine” (من كل فج عميق). The word *kull* here operates in a similar way as it did in Labīd’s line. Up to this point there is no prior referent for “ravine” and thus it would not be immediately clear just which mountain valleys and passes were meant. Would this mean every one in the world? In Arabia? In the immediately surrounding area? Instead, *kull* as a first step refers to a relatively large number of deep ravines, which then is indicated to be taken in its totality: “There are no few deep mountain valleys here, and camels emerge from out of them all.” It is enough to insert a definite article or a demonstrative pronoun for an adequate translation: Pilgrims come “from all the deep ravines / from all those deep ravines.” In German, “aus jedem tief eingeschnittenen Paßweg” (Paret) is not an adequate translation. Rather, “aus all den tief eingeschnittenen Paßwegen” fits the intended meaning.

Yet another example is found in Q 11:59, where it is hardly reasonable to think that the people of ‘Ād follow *everyone* who strays from the right path, as most translations of *wa-ttaba’ū amra kulli jabbārin ‘anīd* suggest: “And followed the command of every powerful, obstinate transgressor” (Yusuf Ali); “and followed the command of every froward potentate” (Pickthall); “und folgten dem Befehl eines jeden (vom rechten Weg) abschweifenden Gewaltmenschen” (Paret). These translations suggest that the people of ‘Ād follow every man as soon as he is a transgressor. But this is absurd. Being a transgressor can have hardly been the criterion for the ‘Ād to decide to follow someone (here a tyrant). Instead, the ‘Ād used to follow their tyrants as a general rule, whether they have departed from the righteous path or not. The above translations give a tone of absurdity to the passage. Rather, an adequate German translation using Paret’s words would be “und folgten dem Befehl aller möglichen vom rechten Weg abschweifenden Gewaltmenschen.” In English, I could conceive of a translation like “they followed the command of many a tyrant who had digressed from the right path.” Another similar example, that of Q 26:255, will be treated more extensively below.

But back once again to Q 22:27, where yet another use of the word *kull* appears, at first sight, to seem to correspond to the pattern just

discussed: *‘alā kulli dāmīrin*. Once again, *kull* can be translated neither by the word “each” or “every,” nor by the word “all.” A translation that states that the pilgrims came “on every lean camel” or “on all lean camels” does not make much sense. Instead, translations like “auf allerlei/lauter Mageren” (the first is Paret’s choice), or “on all sorts of / nothing but lean ones” are better choices for conveying the original Arabic sense.

Constructions of this kind, where the word *kull* occurs before an adjective only (that is, with no corresponding noun), occur so frequently in poetry that it is strikingly apparent. Early Arabic poetry often uses long strands of adjectives preceded by the word “*kull*,” in passages in which the poet boasts about, for example, his animals or weapons: “we mounted all the galloping ones (i.e., horses),” or “we mounted all kinds of galloping ones,” or “we mounted on many a galloping one” and “we reached for all the sharp ones (i.e., swords),” or “... nothing but sharp ones,” or “... many a sharp one.” The use of *kull* in this fashion is so typical of poetry that the construction might well be called the “poetic *kull*.” Semantically, what we have here is simply another instance of the demonstrative component of *kull* that was described above: “There is a not small number of swords. All are sharp” becomes “we reached for all those sharp ones ...” or “we reached for nothing but sharp ones.”

What is remarkable about this construction is this: as omnipresent as this use of the “poetic *kull*” is in poetry, it is by contrast virtually absent as a construction in the Qur’an. Thus the *kull* phrase alone therefore signifies an unmistakable reference to the world of early Arabic poetry.

Although infrequent, poetic style does occasionally show up in verses from the Qur’an, as in Q 22:27, in which a stylistic device appears which is found most typically—and most importantly—in early Arabic poetry, the metonymy, or rather a specific kind of metonymy (or synecdoche) which is as characteristic of early Arabic poetry as is the Kenning (a form of metaphor) for old Norse Scandinavian poetry. Whenever an object becomes the focus of interest in pre-Abbasid Arabic poetry, whether it be camels, swords, or onagers, it must not be mentioned by its common name but by a metonymy, which takes the place of the common name (which itself does not appear at all). In most cases the metonymy designates a characteristic feature or a habitual act of the object in question. Thus a poet would avoid saying, “I mount a camel that is as fast as an onager,” but would

look for other words for the animals. He might say instead “I mount a fleet one that is as fast as a braying one” or “I mount a light-brown meager one that is as fast as the one with the white stripes on the flank,” etc. In a corpus of eighty-three onager episodes from the pre-Islamic into the Umayyad period, the onager is introduced by its common name (*‘ayr*) only once. Instead, through combining conventional metonymic expressions or inventing new ones, the poet is able to establish his originality and achieve an eloquent literary effect.<sup>14</sup>

As central as metonymic expressions of this kind are to poetry, they are rarely found in the Qur’an. The fact that such metonymies are so absent from the literary style of the Qur’an represents an important example of negative intertextuality. The fact that only very few examples of this stylistic device occur throughout the Qur’an would seem to suggest that the device was *consciously* avoided. In those few places where it does appear, it is therefore all the more striking. A very preliminary list of possible cases of metonymies in the vein of early Arabic poetry might comprise the following items: *rawāsī* (13:3 and elsewhere), *qāšīrāt aṭ-ṭarf ‘īn* (37:48 and elsewhere), *aṣ-ṣāfināt* (38:31), *al-ḥūr* (44:54 and elsewhere), *dhāt alwāḥ wa-dusur* (54:13), *khayrāt ḥisān* (55:70), *qaswara* (74:51), *mu‘šīrāt* (78:14), *kawā‘ib atrāb* (78:33), *aṣ-ṣākhkha* (80:33), and *raḥīq makhtūm* (83:25). For each and every single one of these occurrences, it should be asked how and in what way these words or phrases make intentional reference to or are connected with good reason with the world of poetry. Once again, Q 22:27 proves to be an instance of direct intertextuality with poetry.

Another reference can be found in the next word, one that may at first appear somewhat insignificant—but is not: *fajj*, “ravine.” This word is frequently attested in poetry, quite often in the phrase *min kulli fajjin*.<sup>15</sup> But it is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’an. The Qur’an almost always refers to the natural world and its phenomena with general and relatively non-descriptive words. Trees are called *shajar*, palms *nakhl*, and mountains *jibāl*. This is *mubīn*, plain and clear language. But such language would have appeared overwhelmingly banal to the poets. By contrast, the poets were proud of their ability

<sup>14</sup> For further details, see Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, chapter 8 (vol. 1, 172–204).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. Lewin, *Hudāilian Poems*, 326.

to name and describe the plants, to give every palm the name of its specific kind, and to mention every land formation with the most precise term possible. When the early Arabic philologists began in the eighth century CE to compose treatises about plants, camels, horses, sheep and goats, wells and pasture grounds, and other such subjects, they did not do this in order to understand the Qur’an better, but rather to preserve the most distinguished part of their heritage, their literature. The often heard claim that Arabic lexicography owes its existence to a desire to better understand the Qur’an is simply false, for the Qur’an did not contain any words of the kind that earlier lexicographic tracts had taken such pains to clarify. Only very few words in the Qur’an represent an exception to this rule. *Fajj* is one of them. It is the only term for a specific kind of terrain which is more descriptive than the general and more common words for mountain (*jabal*) and valley (*wādī*).

Containing as it does three distinct elements as described above—“poetic” *kull*, metonymy, and exactitude in naming a geographic terrain—Q 22:27 provides us with a clear reference to the world of pre-Islamic poetry. It is certainly no coincidence that this verse deals with the *hajj*, a pre-Islamic ritual of pilgrimage. Only when a larger number of passages that contain such references to the early Arabic world have been analyzed and compared can we determine just how much intertextuality—or negative intertextuality—we are dealing with. However, what is most clear at this point is that the strong reference to poetry that is contained in this verse becomes not only more evident but also more convincing when we are aware of the pattern of an absence of such intertextuality that is the norm between early Arabic poetry and the Qur’an.

#### 4. *The Surah of the Poets Revisited* (Q 26:225)

As I have been arguing all along, early Arabic poetry is in its totality more important for Qur’anic studies than has generally been acknowledged, primarily because (in the absence of any more direct correlation between the two) the corpus of poetry forms an important background against which the Qur’an emerged. Thus I will venture a further interpretation of the much discussed verse from the Surah of the Poets, Q 26:225. This verse has been translated a great many times. Curiously, no one thus far has ever considered it necessary to

check Arabic poetry itself for an interpretation of the verse which, given that poets are the subject of the verse, would seem to be an obvious connection. The text of Q 26:224–226 runs as follows:

وَالشُّعْرَاءَ يَتَّبِعُهُمُ الْغَاوُونَ  
الَّذِينَ تَرَاهُمْ فِي كُلِّ وَادٍ يَبْهيمُونَ  
وَأَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ

Verse 226 offers hardly any questions or uncertainties. Typically translated as “And that they do say what they do not do” (Zwettler), this verse could hardly be rendered in any other way. By contrast, vv. 224–225 offer multiple possibilities for different interpretations, as the following German and English translations show:

– Paret: “Und den Dichtern (die ihrerseits von den Satanen inspiriert sind) folgen diejenigen, die (vom rechten Weg) abgeirrt sind. / Hast du denn nicht gesehen, daß sie in jedem Wadi schwärmen [...]?”<sup>16</sup>

– Henning: “Und die Dichter, es folgen ihnen die Irrenden. / Schaust du nicht, wie sie in jedem Wadi verstört umherlaufen?”<sup>17</sup>

– Arberry: “And the poets—the perverse follow them; / Hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley [...]?”<sup>18</sup>

– Pickthall: “As for poets, the erring follow them. / Hast thou not seen how they stray in every valley [...]?”<sup>19</sup>

– Bell: “And the poets—they follow the beguiled. / Seest thou not that in every wādi they fall madly in love [...]?”<sup>20</sup>

– Shahid: “And the poets are inspired by those who lead astray. / Have you not seen how they wander / wander distraught in every valley [...]?”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Paret (trans.), *Koran*. In English: “And the poets (who, in their turn, are inspired by Satan), are followed by those who have erred (from the right path). Have you not seen, that they swarm in every Wadi?”

<sup>17</sup> Henning (trans.), *Koran*. In English: “And the poets, the mistaken follow them. Do you not see, how in every valley they run around distraught [...]?”

<sup>18</sup> Arberry (trans.), *The Koran Interpreted*.

<sup>19</sup> Pickthall (trans.), *Meaning of the Glorious Koran*.

<sup>20</sup> Bell (trans.), *The Qurʾān*.

<sup>21</sup> Shahid, “Koranic Exegesis.” It is not entirely certain that Shahid would have translated these verses in exactly the way that I have given them above; he himself did not provide us with a complete text of translation. For v. 224 cf. 569; for v. 225 cf. 571; for v. 226 cf. 568. Cf. also Shahid, “Another Contribution.”

– Schub: “As for the poets—the only ones who follow them are the fundamentally disoriented. / You know well that these (fundamentally disoriented) are the ones who flounder about in every wadi [...]”<sup>22</sup>

– Zwettler: “And the poets—they the perverse do follow! / Hast thou not seen that in every valley they are wildering?”<sup>23</sup>

Yet the greatest differences of opinion concern verse 225. Paret translates this verse, which he clearly did not understand, by an equally incomprehensible German phrase. Most other translators understand *hāma* to mean roughly something like “to err, wander, be distracted, stray” with further qualifying information added by such adverbs like “confused, directionless, distracted, bewildered.” These translations obviously owe their existence to the fact that there are not too many things that poets can sensibly do in a valley, and to stray in it, while having lost one’s course, seems to be one of the most obvious ones. However, the problem here is that *hāma* does not have this meaning at all. This meaning can neither be found in early lexicons (such as al-Azhari’s *Tahdhīb al-lughā*)<sup>24</sup> nor is there a single occurrence of the verb in this meaning in the whole of pre-Islamic poetry. It seems clear that the meaning of *hāma* as “wander around” or “stray” has been somewhat capriciously selected as one way to make sense of this text. It should be rejected as a possible translation. Zwettler’s translation “wilder” provides the additional problem that it is an archaic English expression for what is, as we shall see, a most common word of everyday usage in the Arabic language at the Prophet’s time.

<sup>22</sup> Schub, “Qurʾān 26:22.”

<sup>23</sup> Zwettler, “A Mantic Manifesto.”—In a later treatment of this *āya*, Zwettler translates: “[...] that in every wādi [thirstily] they do wilder?” The addition of “thirstily,” albeit in square brackets and without comment, brings his interpretation closer to the one I am offering here, although “wilder” still is not the proper meaning of *hāma*. Cf. Zwettler, “Sura of the Poets,” 114.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Azhari, *Tahdhīb al-lughā*. The *Tahdhīb* is an indispensable tool for research on the Qurʾān and on pre- and early Islamic poetry, not the least because al-Azhari states his sources so very precisely (contrary to the *Lisān al-ʿArab*, which gives only al-Azhari’s name whenever he is quoted). The reader can thus distinguish how expert any given translation may be. Thus, for example, an explanation of a geographical term that is given on the authority of al-Naḍr ibn Shumayl is to be given precedence over the explanation by, let’s say, al-Aṣmaʿī. Zwettler is right to refer to al-Azhari’s work as a “massive and too seldom consulted dictionary.” (Zwettler, “Sura of the Poets,” 116).

Bell is the only one of the translators cited above who provides us with a translation that is based on a meaning that the word *hāma* at least really does contain: to “fall madly in love.” This meaning is found not only in the lexica of the time, but also in poetry. For example, ‘Abid ibn al-Abraṣ says in one of his lines: *fihinna Hindu l-lati hāma l-fu’ādu bihā*,<sup>25</sup> “among them (i.e., among the women in their litters) is Hind, by whom my heart is enflamed with passionate love.” But could this be the intended meaning in the Qur’anic verse about the poets? Apart from the fact that *hāma* in the sense of “fall madly in love with” should have an object introduced by *bi-*,<sup>26</sup> there remains the question of why love would come into play at all at this point. And, as Shahid has already observed, wadis are not the most obvious places to fall in love, even less so “every wadi,” which means nothing less than the following absurdity: as soon as a poet enters a wadi, he falls madly in love. This is not the normal social behavior of poets.

Although Arabic poetry offers evidence that *hāma* may mean “seized by intense love,” this is nonetheless not at all the most common meaning of the root *h-y-m*. It is, however, very probable that the word *yahīmu* is used in the Qur’an with much the same meaning as it is used in poetry. This meaning is “to be thirsty in the highest degree,” “to be at the verge of dying of thirst,” “to be suffering from extreme pains of thirst,” “to go crazy from thirst.” It is from this primary meaning that the secondary and more metaphorical meaning derives, that is, “to languish from love,” “to die of love,” “to be crazy in love.” It is not difficult to find any number of examples for the primary meaning in pre- and early Islamic poetry. Most often the form occurs as *hīmun*, a plural form of *hā’imūn*, f. *haymā’u*. It is used most typically to describe camels, but also can be said of onagers and humans.<sup>27</sup> The context usually involves a description of a desert journey in which the poet describes how he has passed through a desert for days on end with no water. A typical passage can be found in a poem by Labīd, in which he says, among other things (vv. 6–11):

Many a wide desert have I passed through on able she-camels, weary their soles and flesh,

which the heat of midday covers every day with sweat that seems to be tar in their armpits.

<sup>25</sup> Lyall (ed.), *Diwans*, 11 (‘Abid 21:5) (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> See also *Aṣma’iyyāt* 15:8.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, vol. 2, 497 (index).

They set off for a long journey and exposed themselves to the burning of the midday sun and the simoom.

So they became the desert’s ships and summoned up all their courage to endure five days of thirst in a mirage-flooding, biting desert,

(Such a desert) I crossed to known areas, with unkempt men and fatigued camels from ‘Id’s breed, almost dying of thirst (وأطلاج من العيدي (هم)).<sup>28</sup>

Thus far, Labīd offers us an example that is entirely typical of the use of the word *hīm*. One can easily find such typical examples in large number throughout the whole of early Arabic literature. The verb *hāma* (*yahīmu*), meaning “to die of thirst,” is also attested in early Arabic poetry. A verse from ‘Āmir ibn al-Ṭufayl, an exact contemporary of the Prophet, runs as follows:

تَرعى فَرَارَةً فِي مَقَرِّ بِلَادِهَا وَتَهَيِّمُ بَيْنَ شَتَائِقِ وَرِمَالٍ

Fazārah pasture their camels in the very midst of their home-land, and the herds suffer torments of thirst between the long rugged strips clear of sand, and the sand-hills.<sup>29</sup>

The poet wants to make the tribe of the Fazāra appear ridiculous, and reproaches them for letting the cattle die of thirst out of fear of an attack rather than driving them out to water.

These pieces of evidence may suffice to establish that “almost dying of thirst” or “suffering from thirst” is the most frequent meaning that can be assigned to the word *hāma* in early Arabic poetry. It is also apparent that this meaning occurs in the Qur’an as well, in Q 56:54f. in describing the conditions in hell:

فَشَارِبُونَ عَلَيْهِ شَرْبَ الْحَمِيمِ

فَشَارِبُونَ شَرْبَ الْهَيْمِ

Paret’s translation runs:

Und obendrein (w. darauf) werdet ihr heißes Wasser trinken,

So (gierig) wie Kamele, die die Saufkrankheit haben (?).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Labīd, *Dīwān*, 101–103, no. 13. On line 10 cf. WKAS 2/1:226 b 23–35.

<sup>29</sup> Lyall (trans.), *Diwans*, 111/102 (‘Āmir 9:1) (Lyall’s translation).

<sup>30</sup> “And on top of everything else, you will drink hot water / as (eager) as camels that are stricken with the drinking-disease (?).”

Considering the many examples of *hīm* that occur in the literature, it is difficult to justify a translation that uses the word "Saufkrankheit" ("drinking disease") and its accompanying question mark. But the passage means nothing less than that the inhabitants of Hell are "dying of thirst." Note that *hīm* is used here obviously to refer to camels and therefore provides another rare example of a metonymy in the vein of ancient Arabic poetry.

If we take into account both the internal evidence in the Qur'an and the evidence from poetry that backs it up, then it seems most likely that *yahīmūn* in Q 26:255 means "almost dying of thirst." And that brings us back now to the problem of Bell's translation as "crazy with love." While it is far more plausible that someone in the desert would be suffering from thirst rather than dying from love, it is still unclear what thirst has to do with poets. But in order to solve this puzzle, we need first to make a digression.

#### 5. Poets and Other Liars (Q 52:31)

Although poets and poetry are quite specifically mentioned in verse Q 26:224ff., other (less specific and less detailed) references can also be found in verses Q 21:5, 36:69, 37:36, 52:30 and 69:41. In all these references care is taken to declare that the Prophet Muhammad is not a poet and that his proclamations shall not be taken as poetry. Especially interesting is Q 37:35–37, which run as follows:

إِنَّمَا كَانُوا إِذْ أُقِيلَ لَهُمُ اللَّاحِلُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ  
وَيَقُولُونَ أَأَنْتَ الْبَشَرُ الْبَشِيرُ  
بَلْ جَاءَ بِالْحَقِّ وَصَدَّقَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

Arberry translates: "[...] for when it was said to them, 'There is no god but God,' they were ever waxing proud, saying, 'What, shall we forsake our gods for a poet possessed?' 'No indeed; but he brought the truth, and confirmed the Envoys.'" Similarly, Pickthall has: "For when it was said unto them, There is no god save Allah, they were scornful And said: Shall we forsake our gods for a mad poet? Nay, but he brought the Truth, and he confirmed those sent (before him)."

Yet even as clear as this passage is, it still presents us with a potential problem of misinterpretation. For in this place and this place alone, the word *shā'ir* is used with the word *majnūn*. Because Goldziher in his *Abhandlungen zur arabischen Philologie* had already collected passages according to which a certain form of poetry (but not poetry as a whole) had been considered in earlier times as inspired by demons, this passage has been taken as confirmation of this theory. Thus this passage has been used as evidence that the statement according to which the Prophet is not a poet was made in order to oppose the accusation that the Prophet was inspired by demons.<sup>31</sup> Irfan Shahid's interpretation of verse Q 26:224ff. rests on this assumption. However, such an interpretation of the passage Q 37:36 cited above is only possible if verse 36 is considered apart from its context. From the following verse, it is made more than eminently clear that it was not the type of inspiration which disturbed the sinners, but rather that they merely doubted the truthful content of the proclamation.

Yet another point should make us suspicious. The passage suggests that the sinners had indeed regarded Muhammad as a poet. But the reasons given are quite curious ones: that the sinners always accused the Prophet of being a poet whenever he preached that, "there is no god but God." This is an unusual connection, given that the text of the Islamic confession of a monotheistic God does not give the slightest occasion for thinking about poetry, neither in a linguistic nor in a stylistic way. The only thing that it has, in the eyes of the sinners, in common with poetry, is that it is a lie. And that makes them think of poetry.

Other passages confirm this. Muhammad is taken not only to be a poet, but also as a *kāhin* or magician (*sāhir*). Now, we do not know very much about the kinds of activities a *kāhin* would have engaged in, but the little we do know does not correspond at all with the actions of Muhammad. Where magicians are concerned, this lack of correspondence is even clearer: Muhammad was clearly no magician; he was not able to perform magic. The charges levied against Muhammad are not that he *would* perform magic, but rather than he *could not* do so. Behind the reproach against him as a would-be magician stands none other than the charge that he is a liar: *hādihā*

<sup>31</sup> The *locus classicus* for the inspiration of poets by jinn is Ignaz Goldziher, "Higā'-Poesie." Note that Goldziher is much more cautious in his conclusions than most of his followers.

*sāhirun kadhdhābun* (Q 38:4). The charges that Muhammad would have been known as a *majnūn*, as a possessed person, belong in the same category. Despite the many references to Muhammad as *kāhīn*, *sāhir*, *shā'ir*, und *majnūn*, which appear in various combinations,<sup>32</sup> these do not in the least imply that he was believed to be all these things. Rather, they function as a debasement. In the eyes of the residents of Mecca, with their emphasis on a sober rationality, Muhammad simply appeared to be lacking in reliability. By equating the Prophet with these dubious kinds of people, his denouncers merely wanted to brand him as a liar—without necessarily postulating any further commonalities with any of these groups.

But above all stands the accusation that Muhammad's message is nothing less than a lie in and of itself. This is the real claim that lies behind any accusation of Muhammad being a poet. For example, in Q 36:69, we find:

وَمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ الشِّعْرَ وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْآنٌ مُبِينٌ

We did not teach him poetry. Poetry would have been inappropriate for him. It is nothing other than a reminder and a clear Qur'an.

In admitting that Muhammad is not a poet, this verse answers opponents that reproach the Prophet not for being a poet, but rather for *not* being one. The excuse is offered that it would not suit the Prophet to be a poet. Then two important differences between the Qur'an and poetry are offered: The Qur'an is *dhikr*, an admonition, and contains ethical dimensions that are not found in poetry (that is, according to its believers, for of course poetry may also be ethically-oriented, although differently so, and thus not accepted as such by the religious). And the Qur'an is *mubīn*, which poetry is not. Early Arabic poetry is full of words that are difficult to understand, full of metonymies and comparisons; these are available only to the most refined connoisseurs. Such poetry is highly intertextual, containing a great number of intertextual references. Only those who could recognize the intricate designs of a motif, a formula, a comparison could truly appreciate its aesthetic qualities. Early Arabic poetry was a matter for a narrow and high stratum of aristocrats, experts, enthusiasts, and not at all intended for the common folk.<sup>33</sup> The production of such texts would not be at all an appropriate undertaking for the Prophet.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. EQ, s. v. "Insanity."

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, vol. 1.

By contrast, the Qur'an claims to be an entirely different kind of literature. Its purpose is to convey an ethical message, a proclamation intended to reach out to everyone and not just to a small group of connoisseurs. Therefore, the Qur'an is intentionally free from the obscure stylistic devices that marked poetry, is thus *mubīn*, as it is stated some thirteen times. In order for the Qur'an to be a *kitāb mubīn*, a clear or transparent book, as it is so often claimed, there must be something against which it is measured that is not *mubīn*. And this is, on the one hand, the non-Arabic writing of the Jews and the Christians, but also, on the other hand, as this passage shows, Arabic poetry with its consciously artificial and highly wrought language.

Before we return to a consideration of Q 26:224ff., I would like to look at a final passage, Q 52:29–31, in which poetry is also the topic:

فَلَذَكَّرْنَا أَنْتَ بِنِعْمَةِ رَبِّكَ بِكَاهِنٍ وَلَا مَجْنُونٍ  
أَمْ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ مُّرْتَبِصٌ بِهِ رَبِّبَ الْمُتُونِ  
قُلْ تَرَبِّصُوا فَإِنِّي مَعَكُمْ مِنَ الْمُرْتَبِصِينَ

Therefore remind! by the Lord's blessing thou art not a soothsayer neither possessed.

Or do they say, "He is a poet for whom we await Fate's uncertainty"?

Say: "Await! I shall be awaiting with you." (Arberry)

Here, too, it is above all established that Muhammad is neither a *kāhīn*, nor someone possessed, nor a poet. Already this string of reproaches to which the verse answers reveals that the unbelievers cannot possibly have been convinced that he really ever was a *kāhīn* or a poet, since if Muhammad had offered conclusive evidence that he was a member of one of these groups, any identification with any one of them would have excluded the others. For a poet and a *kāhīn*, to say nothing of the charge of being a magician, have nothing in common, except for the fact that, in the world in which Muhammad then lived, they had the reputation of telling lies. Additionally, one can observe in the above passage that *majnūn* and *shā'ir* mean two different things. Thus there is not necessarily a connection between being a poet and being possessed.

The main argument in Q 52:29–31 is directed against the accusation that the Prophet is a poet. The statement of the disbelievers is cited here in direct speech, and it may seem somewhat enigmatic at first sight. Paret offers the following translation: “(Er ist) ein Dichter. Wir wollen abwarten (und sehen), was das Schicksal an unvorhergesehenem (Unheil) für ihn bereit hat.”<sup>34</sup> Contrary to Arberry’s more adequate translation quoted above, Paret places a period after the word “poet.” He begins a new sentence with the word *natarabbašu*. This gives the impression that Paret sees no connection between being a poet and the ominous “unforeseen disaster,” but rather that the predictions of disaster have more to do with the ill-will of the unbelievers. However, this is not the case, for the words *natarabbašu bihi* represent a relative clause, one that modifies the word “poet.” This seems to create a rather strange meaning, for why should poets be singled out for misfortune any more than any other beings? But this is not what is meant: it is not that poets are more often victims of *rayb al-manūn*, but rather simply that they talk about such things as *rayb al-manūn* more often than other people!

The word *manūn* occurs in the Qur’an in this one passage only. Although the word *rayb* is more often attested in the Qur’an, it has a different meaning here than it does in all of the other passages. The word *maniyya*, which is almost identical in meaning with the word *manūn*, does not appear in the Qur’an at all. The concept of fate as it is implied by the words *manūn* and *maniyya*<sup>35</sup> is foreign to the message of the Qur’an. By contrast, these two words occur quite frequently in poetry and represent essential and key concepts about the world as it is portrayed by early Arabic poetry. Additionally, in many passages where the word *manūn* is used in poetry, it appears in combination with the word *rayb*.<sup>36</sup> Even more telling is the fact that the phrase *rayb al-manūn* is also an important keyword in early Arabic poetry. To be a victim of *rayb al-manūn* can mean either the imminence of one’s own death or the death of a close relative, and thus it is typically heard as a lament in poetry of mourning. On hearing this expression, every contemporary of Muhammad must have inevitably thought of poetry. And verse Q 52:30 also raises the subject of the poet. Therefore, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the expression

<sup>34</sup> “(He is) a poet. We will wait (and see) what unforeseen (disaster) fate has in store for him.”

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Caskel, *Schicksal*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. evidence in Caskel, *Schicksal* and Lewin, *Huḍailian Poems*.

*rayb al-manūn* in this verse represents a *quotation* from poetry, as if it were something said by the unbelieving. Such people were not, as we have seen, especially convinced by Muhammad’s poetic abilities; this expression here is meant to be somewhat ironic and derogatory. Thus the choice of exactly this expression is extremely skillful, because the opponents of Muhammad could succeed at putting words into the mouth of the supposed poet that were diametrically opposed to the message of the Qur’an. Compare, for example, the rejection of the *dahr* in verse Q 45:24. Thus the mockery of his opponents did not rest with simply describing Muhammad as a poet; they went further and ascribed to him the doctrines about which he as a poet would have had to speak. If he were, in fact, a true poet, then he certainly would have had to begin to speak about *rayb al-manūn* happening to him. Somewhat crudely given, Muhammad answers: “Then you’d still be waiting.”

Knowledge of early Arabic poetry thus allows us to recognize in Q 52:31 an ironically used quotation from poetry that is put into the mouth of the opponents of Muhammad.

#### 6. Poets Dying of Thirst in the Wadi (Q 26:225 Continued)

It is finally time now to return to a deeper consideration of verse Q 26:225. We have seen that, in general, poets in Muhammad’s environment were not trusted to tell the truth. And Muhammad was accused of being a poet for no other reason than that. In the same vein, the real accusation in Q 26:226 is not that he is a poet, but rather a liar. This is made very clear when it is said of the poets “that they say what they do not do.”

This passage in the Surah of the Poets is apparently directed at a different audience than those passages in which the reproaches that the Prophet be a poet are refuted. The purpose of Q 26:224–226 is to show that poets are in fact truly liars. So these verses must be directed at those people who had no prejudice against poets as liars. The target of these verses are those who are followers of the poets, those who believe in them and share their world view.

The worldview of the aristocratic elite stemming from powerful Bedouin tribes is characterized by the concept of the *murū’a*, which describes a heroic and manly ethos held by a social group who were not mere herders of camels (this work was carried out by slaves and



lesser tribes). Rather, they were seen instead as heroes of war and battle, of the hunt, of the feast and even of poetry, whereby the ability to compose formally perfect and effective poems was not only mere literary talent but itself a part of this system of values.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the word *murū'a* does not occur in the Qur'an.

The virtue of *murū'a* includes bravery, generosity, courage, a sense of honor, and other similar qualities. All of these values are glorified in early Arabic poetry. Talks of fights, wine and feasts, the *maysir* game, of the hunt, of conquests in love with pampered and elegant women, and other such subjects occur frequently. When the poets spoke of these subjects, to be sure, they might exaggerate and embroider them, but it cannot be claimed that they were outright lying. In Q 26:226, instead, the poets are accused of "say[ing] what they do not do." Consequently, we have to look for a common motif in pre- and early Islamic poetry, in which the poets boast of acts which in reality they did not perform.

The most obvious solution is the following: One of the actions by which one proves one's *murū'a* is suffering deprivation and facing dangers. As one of the most common of themes in poetry, proving oneself is often achieved by fighting bravely or in bearing the hardships of a long desert journey. There could hardly have been even one poet who did not treat this subject in some fashion or the other. The desert journey of Labīd has already been mentioned above. We also find this theme even more frequently in the writings of Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, another contemporary—and at first opponent—of the Prophet. Again and again, this poet has described in his *qaṣā'id* how he crossed a dangerous desert, one in which it was easy to get lost because there were no recognizable landmarks, a desert that was "dun and dangerous, in which the whistling of the Djinn is heard and which only 'whole' men dared to cross,"<sup>38</sup> a wasteland in which the wolves howl, the bleached bones of carcasses lie about—a desert where one could easily die from thirst.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Montgomery, "Dichotomy."

<sup>38</sup> Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, *Diwān*, 36: بِمَضِيعَةِ غَيْرَاءَ تَعْرِفُ جَنَاهَا مَذْكَارُ. Oskar Rescher translates: "[...] in einer erdfarbenen gefährlichen Wüste [...], in der der Djinn Pfeifen zu hören war und die nur ganze Männer zu durchqueren wagen" (Rescher, *Beiträge*, 103).

<sup>39</sup> Additional evidence from Ka'b: p. 73–81 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 113–115); p. 92–97 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 117–119); p. 124–125 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*,

And therein lies the explanation for verse Q 26:225. What the poets say but in fact do not do, is found in the Qur'an itself: *fī kulli wādin yahīmūn*, "to die from thirst in all those wadis." Just as with *rayb al-manūn* in Q 52:30, the meaning is intended to be ironic; the only difference is that it is represented indirectly rather than as direct speech. In countless pieces of poetry, poets claim to have crossed a dangerous desert where for days on end there was no water to drink, where they and their camels were dying of thirst. But this is exactly what the poets, as members of a wealthy and aristocratic upper class, did not do: "die from thirst" in the desert. This theme is treated in poetry for several reasons: because it is one of the most major and conventional themes of poetry, because the poet can thus show off his artistry, because it is wonderfully suitable as a way of showing the virtue of the *murū'a*; because in poems of praise it is also well-suited as a motif of transition, which allows the poet to describe, as if before the very eyes of the person being praised, the many exertions which had to be taken and undergone in order for him (the poet) to come before the praised one and praise him. In reality it would not have occurred to any poet to make such a dangerous ride through the middle of a difficult desert. The wars at that time in the north and south of Arabia show that it was indeed possible to transport whole armies through the desert and across Arabia. And it was entirely possible to avoid such conditions as hunger and thirst on the way to Mecca, al-Ḥīra, or any other place that might reasonably be treated in the poetry of the day. Could there be any better proof of the mendacity of the poets than the fact that they nevertheless insisted in claiming otherwise?

Three additional points still need to be briefly mentioned in order to drive home the intentions of the Qur'an here. First of all, the meaning of *kull* in *fī kulli wādin* is worth singling out. It is an example of the demonstrative function of *kull* as described above, in which it is still open to question exactly which wadis are being referred to, since there has been up to this point no discussion of any wadis, and the listener cannot glean from his previous knowledge nor from the context precisely which wadis suddenly are being talked about. With this reference, the set of the wadis is thus established first by means of this word *kull*; only secondarily is this number universalized.

129–130); p. 136–139 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 134–135); p. 216–221 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 154–156).

Therefore, this expression should not be translated here as meaning “in each wadi” or “in every wadi,” but rather “in all the wadis” or “in all those wadis,” or perhaps even as “in all kinds of wadis.”

Although the preceding verse (Q 26:224) causes us no problems in its translation, nonetheless translations from Paret and Shahid do give occasion to raise a couple of remarks. First of all, the verse is a topic-comment sentence, in which the theme “the poets” is brought forward against the usual word order and sentence construction, in order to place special emphasis on it. Such topic-comment sentences are frequently found in the Qur’an. Just to mention two examples:

Q 42:26: *وَالْكَافِرُونَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ* “And the unbelievers—for them awaits a terrible chastisement” (Arberry);

Q 55:10: *وَالْأَرْضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلْأَنَامِ* “And earth—He set it down for all beings” (Arberry).

Unlike Paret’s translation (but in correspondence with most English translations), this construction should be reflected in the translation.

Finally, a short notice on Irfan Shahid’s translating the word *ghāwūn* as “lead astray” may suffice, given the thorough refutation of this idea by M. Zwettler, with which I completely agree.<sup>40</sup> The main argument against Shahid’s interpretation is the evidence within the Qur’an where *ghāwūn*, in all six passages in which the word *ghāwūn* occurs, means “to go astray.” The closest parallels to our verse are offered by Q 15:42, where both *ghāwūn* and also *ittaba’a*<sup>41</sup> occur. In this passage, God says to Iblis that he shall not have authority over his servants “except those that follow thee, that is, those who go astray” (*illā man ittaba’aka mina l-ghāwīn*, my own translation).

I have already addressed the fact that Shahid’s idea of the poets’ demonic inspiration is somewhat overblown. Professional poets were regarded at this time as artists who achieved immortality by means of their own artistry (as can be shown by many poetic passages). Furthermore, professional poets mention demonic inspiration only very seldom and often with an ironic twist. Instead, in the many lines in which poets boast of their skill in poetry, they always insist that their poetry be their very own and individual achievement. Demons

<sup>40</sup> Zwettler, “Sura of the Poets.”

<sup>41</sup> Shahid’s suggestion that *ittaba’a* is used in a technical way here and means something like “inspired” has no basis (Shahid, “Koranic Exegesis,” 569).

are never mentioned in this context as a source of inspiration.<sup>42</sup> For Paret’s parenthetical insertion (“die ihrerseits von den Satanen inspiriert sind”), which even for Paret is extraordinarily redundant, there is no basis.

Thus it remains that the *ghāwūn* are those people who go astray. That is, Q 26:224–226 is more appropriately translated as follows:

And the poets: Those who go astray follow them. /

Don’t you know that they “die from thirst in all kinds of valleys,” /

and that they (as you can see) do not do what they say they do?<sup>43</sup>

This passage makes two points: It begins as a straightforward and rather simple statement about the path of righteousness: whoever follows the poets is not following the right path, that path that leads to salvation. But it also contains a somewhat surprising point, which is that, in the end, this is exactly what the poets themselves say! The poets themselves are being quoted, as they themselves say that they constantly “die from thirst in all those wadis”! The same destiny thus awaits those who follow the poets. Or maybe not. For there is also a second surprising twist to this saying: in reality, poets do not die of thirst at all in the valleys, but are just boasting. That of course makes the accusation here even worse: those who follow the poets have lost their way because poets are liars, when they glorify the deceitful ideal of the virtue of the *murū’a*.

These verses are a rhetorical gem. With the utmost brevity (a style known as *ījāz* in Arabic rhetoric and used to the utmost in the Qur’an), and by a clever word play full of biting irony, a popular theme of poetry is turned back against the poets. A powerful argument is thus evoked, one which warns people against following the poets in the value system of the *murū’a* which they represent. As Q 2:227 also makes clear, it is not the act of poetry per se which is bad, but rather

<sup>42</sup> The overestimation of the idea of demonic inspiration of poetry is the main shortcoming of Zwettler’s article “A Mantic Manifesto.” I know of no single, non-ironic *qarīd*-line composed by a Mukhadram poet, in which his verses are ascribed to the inspiration of jinn. Instead, there are dozens of lines in which a poet is proud of his own inimitable lines, which he considers the exclusive achievement of his own poetic faculty.

<sup>43</sup> In German: “Und nun zu den Dichtern: Ihnen folgen die, die in die Irre gehen. / Man weiß doch, daß sie ‘in allerlei Wadis vor Durst schier verschmachten,’ / und daß sie (wie man sieht) nicht tun, was sie sagen!”

the old Arabic world view of hero-worship and boastful worldview perpetuated by the poets.

Although this verse—which in a sense quotes back to the poets their own formulations—represents an exception rather than the rule, it should nevertheless be clear by now that there is a constant “presence” of early Arabic poetry in the Qur’an as a whole, be it in the form of lexicographic, grammatical, and stylistic parallels between poetry and the Qur’an, or through the use of allusions and quotations, or, lastly but perhaps most importantly, in the conscious avoidance of some of the key characteristic elements of poetry. The fact that entire collections of the poems of early Arabic poets such as the *Dīwān* of Bishr ibn Abī Khāzim, to mention just this example, remain fully unresearched is an indicator of just how much work in the world of Arabic poetry remains. While it is equally clear that Qur’an research would benefit from explorations into the world of both Syrian and Ethiopic sources, quite obviously the best place to start is with those texts that derive from that period immediately surrounding the revelation of the Qur’an, namely, early Arabic poetry.

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## QUR'ANIC READINGS OF THE PSALMS\*

Angelika Neuwirth

### Introduction

*Kullu man 'alayhā fān*—"everyone on earth is to perish / but the face of your Lord, full of majesty and grace, shall abide." This Qur'anic verse is the expressive headline of a funeral inscription on the tomb of Turkān Khātūn,<sup>1</sup> a pious Mongol lady who had in her will ordained to be buried in Jerusalem, in a mausoleum on Ṭarīq Bāb as-Silsilah. The verse has spoken to innumerable pious, who since Turkān Khātūn's time, the fourteenth century, have passed through that road on their way to the Ḥaram ash-Sharīf and the Aqṣā Mosque. The verse for the Muslim observer evokes one of the most significant texts of his tradition, Sūrat al-Raḥmān. But were it realized and read by non-Muslims as well, it would speak to them no less suggestively, since it reflects a verse of the Psalms, Ps 104:29/31, which says about God's relation to mankind: "They all perish, to dust they return [...] may the glory of the Lord endure forever"—in Hebrew: *tōsēfrūhām yigwā'ūn we-el 'aphārām yeshūbhūn [...] yehī kebhōd YHWH le-'ōlām*. The Qur'anic verse thus is a poetic reminder of the truth that Jerusalem, the emblem of monotheism, is a palimpsest of plural traditions, some of which—certainly the Psalms—permeate the entire fabric; it also proves that the Christian tradition did not close the gate of biblical interpretation.

The topic of this paper is this very kind of intertextuality between the Qur'an and the Psalms, though as confined to the early Meccan texts. Heinrich Speyer,<sup>2</sup> an eminent representative of pre-Second-World-War German Qur'anic scholarship, has alerted us to the large amount of traces of psalm verses reflected in the Qur'an. He lists no less than 141, a number that can be easily increased through a micro-structural reading of the Qur'an, such as is presently undertaken in

\* I thank Ghassan El-Masri for patiently correcting my English.

<sup>1</sup> See Borgoyne, *Mamluk Jerusalem*, 321–324.

<sup>2</sup> See Rosenthal, "Speyer's Die biblischen Erzählungen."