

## Article

# Moral Visions in Medieval Muslim Interpretations of Sūra 102 *Al-Takāthur*: Warnings against Pride, Wealth, or Pleasure?

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on sūra 102 *al-Takāthur* of the Qurʾān which addresses those preoccupied with *al-takāthur* (competition for superiority in number, or accumulation of wealth), warning them of the punishment of Hell in the Hereafter and of their interrogation about *al-naʿīm* (the worldly pleasures) on the Day of Judgement. The grave eschatological implications of engaging in *al-takāthur* and *al-naʿīm*, conveyed in this sūra, have triggered attempts by Muslim scholars to determine the intended meanings of these notions and the scope of their reference. This article examines the interpretations of *al-takāthur* and *al-naʿīm* in medieval commentaries on sūra *al-Takāthur* with the aim of identifying and analysing various interpretative trends regarding these two notions and exploring their connection with the moral orientations among Muslims in the medieval period of Islamic history.

**Keywords:** *takāthur*; *naʿīm*; pride; wealth; worldly pleasures; Qurʾān; interpretation; *tafsīr*



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## 1. Introduction

### Sūra 102 *al-Takāthur*<sup>1</sup>

*Al-takāthur* diverts you, (1)  
even till you visit the graves. (2)  
No indeed; but soon you shall know. (3)  
Again, no indeed; but soon you shall know. (4)  
No indeed; were you to know with the knowledge of certainty! (5)  
You shall surely see Hell; (6)  
Again, you shall surely see it with the eye of certainty (7)  
then you shall be questioned that day concerning *al-naʿīm*. (8)

Sūra *al-Takāthur* belongs, in Fred Donner's classification of Qurʾānic contents (Donner 1998, p. 64), to the paraenetic category—the short, rhymed exhortations warning the audience of the Qurʾān about the Last Judgement and urging them to believe in God and do various good deeds. Its reproach to the unnamed addressees that they are being diverted by *al-takāthur* until they 'visit the graves', and the threatening promise that they will 'surely see Hell' and will be interrogated about *al-naʿīm* on the Day of Judgement, is a clear sign of condemnation of these two preoccupations. But to what exactly do *al-takāthur* and *al-naʿīm* refer? Which vices do they stand for? In recent scholarship on the Qurʾān as a text of Late Antiquity, two different readings have been suggested for sūra *al-Takāthur* and the vices censured therein. Angelika Neuwirth (2019), approaching it from the 'Arabian Late Antiquity' perspective, has read this sūra as part of the Qurʾān's critique of the pre-Islamic Arabian virtues of familial and tribal loyalties and pride in genealogy, and its attempt to replace these virtues with individual piety and spiritual loyalties. The addressees of sūra *al-Takāthur* in such a reading are the pagans who are being reproached for their obsession with 'increasing their familial alliances and, by extension, with improving their wealth and

public standing, to lapse into ancestry worship' rather than taking care of their own fate in the Hereafter (Neuwirth 2019, p. 66). The reference to their 'visiting the graves' points accordingly to the practice of ancestry worship and refers 'most probably to the family graveyards familiar in the Late Antique Near East' (Neuwirth 2019, p. 86, f. 24). Nicolai Sinai (2017, pp. 222–26) has treated sūra *al-Takāthur* as an example of the early Qur'ān's eschatological kerygma and in relation to Biblical and Syriac-Christian literature. He has read it as the Qur'ānic critique of the vice of avarice and 'fundamentally misguided attitude to material wealth'. Accordingly, he opts against reading the reference to their 'visiting to the graves' literally and understands it as referring to death. In other words, the addressees are reproached for being preoccupied with the increase of their material wealth until they die and are buried in the graves.

This article, in line with the theme of this Special Issue, approaches sūra *al-Takāthur* from the reception history perspective. It asks how medieval Muslim authors, concerned with the serious eschatological consequences of the preoccupation with *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im*, understood these two notions, their scope of reference, and the implications they had for the moral orientations of Muslim societies. In particular, the article examines the notions of *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im* through the lens of medieval Muslim exegetical literature, identifying and analysing various interpretative trends therein, and offering some observations about the moral visions they reflect. This article is primarily based on the selected works of the *tafsīr* and '*ulūm al-Qur'ān*' genres, written in the period from the 2nd/8th to the 7th/13th centuries. These works are listed in the references at the end of this article and their place in the history of Qur'ānic exegesis is outlined in Claude Gilliot's (2002) survey of medieval Muslim interpretations of the Qur'ān. The overview of these various interpretative trends, organised thematically, is offered in the second and third sections of this article, focusing, respectively, on the notions of *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im*. This is followed, in the fourth section, by a discussion of the diverse and dynamic readings of the moral injunctions thought to be conveyed through these two notions.

## 2. Defining *Al-Takāthur* in Medieval Works of *Tafsīr*

The possibility for diverse interpretations of *al-takāthur* arises from this word's ability to denote various significations. Morphologically, the sixth form of the root *k-th-r*, meaning 'to be or become numerous, abundant, accumulated or multiplied, to occur frequently, to increase', it can convey the idea of reciprocity (hence Lane (1863, vol. I, p. 2593) defines the verb *takātharū* as 'they contended together for superiority in the amount or number of property and children and men'; see also Sinai 2017, pp. 223–24), but can also connote reflexiveness (hence Lane's definition of *takāthur* as 'multiplication or accumulation by degrees, or increase, growth, gathering'). Medieval Muslim commentators were aware of these differences in meaning. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108) for instance, notes that the word *kathrah* can refer not only to number ('*adad*'), but also to surplus wealth (*fadl*) (al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī 1906, p. 439). The potential of the form *takāthur* to convey both reciprocity and reflexiveness is observed by al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) who says that the word *al-takāthur* in this sūra allows for two meanings (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 75). First is the meaning of reciprocity (*ma'nā mufā'alah*) when each of the two participants says, 'I am greater than you with regard to wealth and more powerful with regard to people'. Second, it can also refer to one's preoccupation with accumulation (*takalluf bi-l-kathrah*), as when a greedy person is preoccupied with increasing his wealth throughout his life.

This semantic flexibility is reflected in the two prevalent interpretations of *al-takāthur* in our sources—either as competition for precedence with the emphasis on pride (*fakhr*), or as accumulation of wealth (*māl*), emphasising avarice. In addition, the commentators' understanding of *al-takāthur* has been influenced by the wording of Qur'ān 57:20, the only other verse where the form *takāthur* occurs: *Know that the present life is but a sport and a diversion, an adornment, and a cause for boasting among you (al-tafākhur baynakum), and a rivalry in wealth and children (takāthur fī-l-amwāl wa-l-awlād)*. This influence is evident in the interpretations of *al-takāthur* as mutual boasting (*tafākhur*) and rivalry or desire to increase

one's wealth (*amwāl*), or wealth and children (*al-amwāl wa-l-awlād*), as discussed in the following overview.

- (a) *Al-takāthur* as competition and pride (*tafākhur*) in numerical strength, lineage, and glorious deeds

The first widespread definition of *al-takāthur* in our sources is *al-tafākhur*. Like *takāthur*, the word *tafākhur* is the sixth form of the root *f-kh-r*, meaning 'to boast or be proud of', and can indicate both a reflexive meaning of 'self-praise' or 'being proud' of one's qualities or possessions, as well as a reciprocal meaning of a 'competition for glory or mutual boasting'. The latter is synonymous with *mufākharah*—a verbal contest for precedence and honour among the tribes in pre-Islamic Arabia, whose customary topics included courage in the battlefield, generosity, wise judgment, one's ability to enjoy the pleasures of life, and other honour-related subjects (Wagner and Farès 2012). In the case of sūra *al-Takāthur*, it is the tribe's numerical strength ('*adad*'), noble lineage (*nasab*), and glorious deeds (*manāqib*) that are named as subjects of the competition.

Ibn 'Abbās (d. ca. 68/687–8) is the earliest figure credited with interpreting *al-takāthur* as 'mutual boasting about the noble descent and genealogy' (*al-tafākhur bi-l-ḥasab wa-l-nasab*) (al-Fīrūzābādī 2018, p. 657). This interpretation is clarified through the story of the two clans of Quraysh—Banū Sahm and Banū 'Abd Manāf—who were competing among themselves for precedence in numerical strength (*tafākharū ayyuhumm aktharu 'adadan*). Banū 'Abd Manāf turned out to have more tribesmen, but Banū Sahm said to them, 'We were destroyed by the injustice (*al-baghy*) in the time of Jāhiliyyah, let us count the living of our clan and of yours, and the dead of our clan and of yours'. They did so, and now Banū Sahm turned out to be more numerous. Then, God revealed about them: 'boasting about your noble descent and genealogy has preoccupied you, so that you even visited the graves in order to mention the dead among your number'.

This story of Banū 'Abd Manāf and Banū Sahm appears in the *tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), one of the earliest complete commentaries on the Qur'ān (Muqātil ibn Sulaymān 2003, vol. 3, p. 514). Its details therein convey an atmosphere of a verbal tribal contest for precedence in the familiar subjects of numerical advantage, power, strength, and noble lineage.

The story of the two contending parties has become the standard occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) for this sūra, notwithstanding some variation as to the subject of the competition, whether it involved visiting the graves and counting the dead or, alternatively, preoccupied the contenders until the end of their lives, and the identity of the contenders (al-Farrā' 1972, vol. 3, p. 287; Ibn Qutaybah 1958, p. 537; al-Samarqandī 2014, vol. 3, p. 506; al-Zamakhsharī n.d., vol. 4, p. 791). Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938) (1999, vol. 10, p. 3460) mentions two additional identifications of the contenders: that they were the two tribes of the Anṣār—Banū Ḥārithah and Banū Ḥārith, from Ibn Buraydah (d. 115/733); or that the verse was revealed about the Jews (*nazalat fī l-yahūd*), as reported from Qatādah (d. 118/736). Two occasions of its revelation—one involving Banū Sahm and Banū 'Abd Manāf and the other involving the Jews—are given in al-Wāḥidī's (d. 468/1076) *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Wāḥidī 2008, p. 258), and in the commentaries of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) (2002, vol. 10, p. 276) and al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) (1987, vol. 4, p. 520). al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154) mentions all three: the Jews (*al-yahūd*); the two clans from the Anṣār; and Banū Sahm and Banū 'Abd Manāf (al-Ṭabrisī 1986, vol. 10, p. 811); while al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) adds the fourth and fifth options—that this verse was revealed about the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), from Qatādah, or about the merchants (*al-tujjār*), from 'Amr ibn Dīnār (d. 126/744) (al-Qurṭubī 1994, vol. 19, p. 401).

The emphasis on glorious deeds as the topic of the contest is implicit in the interpretation of *al-takāthur* as 'taking pride in the way the deceased passed away and mutual boasting about the deceased', mentioned by al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) who deemed such behaviour 'improper' (*ghayr mustaqīm*) (2005, vol. 10, p. 607), and is explicit in its interpretation as 'competition in the greater number of virtues' (*al-tafākhur bi-kathrat al-manāqib*), given by al-Ṭūsī (1963, vol. 10, p. 402).

Moreover, the association of *al-takāthur* with pride (*tafākḥur*) in one's noble descent and ancestors was known outside the circles of the Qur'ān commentators. It is found, for example, in Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī's (d. ca. 440/1048) work on mineralogy (al-Bīrūnī 1995, pp. 82–84). In the introduction to it, al-Bīrūnī discusses the qualities of *muruwwah* (manliness) and *futuwwah* (chivalry, generosity), and says that the latter allows the one who possesses it to rise to high rank even though he was not born into it and that this achievement is due to his merit, not ancient lineage. He then illustrates this message about the precedence of personal merit over ancient lineage through anecdotes, poetic citations, wise sayings, and the citation from sūra *al-Takāthur*. This citation is placed between the anecdote about a person of an ancient lineage who petitioned Ismā'īl ibn Aḥmad al-Sāmānī (d. 295/907) in the name of his ancestors only to receive a reply encouraging him to rely instead on his own merit, and the saying of a Greek sage that, 'the one who tries to forge ties through his relatives and is proud of his dead ancestors—he is dead and they are alive'.

(b) *Al-takāthur* as avarice, hoarding of wealth (*māl*) or boasting of its abundance

Another often mentioned interpretation of *al-takāthur* in our sources is related to wealth or material possessions (*māl*) and implicates the vice of avarice, although admittedly the phrase *al-takāthur bi-l-māl* does not always allow a distinction between boasting of wealth which emphasises pride and hoarding of wealth which emphasises avarice.

The association of *al-takāthur* with wealth is primarily established in our sources through prophetic *ḥadīths*. One of them is related by Muṭarrif ibn 'Abdallāh ibn al-Shikhkhīr (d. 95/713) from his father who visited the Prophet when the Prophet was reciting sūra *al-Takāthur*. Then, the Prophet said, 'The son of Ādam says, "My wealth! My wealth (*mālī mālī*)!" But do you own anything (*hal la-ka min mālika*), except what you gave in charity, having spent it (*mā taṣaddaḡta fa-amḡayta*), or what you ate having finished it (*akalta fa-afḡayta*), or what you wore having worn it out (*labista fa-ablayta*)?' (al-Tirmidhī 2007, vol. 6, pp. 87–88; vol. 4, pp. 371–72). The connection between *al-takāthur* and wealth is suggested in this *ḥadīth* by the sequence of the Prophet's actions: his recitation of the sūra followed by the pronouncement about material possessions, understood as his comment on the *al-takāthur* verse.

Among the commentators this association is prominent in al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *tafsīr* (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, pp. 678–79), although his interpretation of *al-takāthur* combines boasting of both: the abundance of wealth and the great numbers (*al-mubāhāh bi-kathrat al-māl wa-l-'adad*). While reference to numbers is presented as the view of the commentators (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) and supported by the above-mentioned story of the two contending clans, the reference to wealth is associated with the sayings related from the Prophet, namely, the 'My wealth!' *ḥadīth* and the 'Valley of gold' *ḥadīth*, discussed below.

The 'My wealth!' *ḥadīth* is also included in the commentaries of al-Samarqandī (2014, vol. 3, p. 506), al-Māturīdī (2005, vol. 10, p. 608), al-Ṭabrisī (1986, vol. 10, p. 812), al-Tha'labī (2002, vol. 10, p. 277), and al-Baghawī (1987, vol. 4, p. 520), among others. It is used to support the interpretation of *al-takāthur* as 'greed for wealth' (*al-ḥirṣ 'alā l-māl*) and 'striving to increase it' (*ṭalab takthūrihi*), such that a person refuses the wealth dues (*mana'tum al-ḥuqūq al-māliyyah*) until his death and says regarding this, 'I have intrusted the payment of *zakāt* to the care of such-and-such a person (*awṣaytu li-aḡl al-zakāh bi-kādhā*) and the performance of *ḥajj* to the care of such-and-such a person' (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 77).

The second *ḥadīth* used to affirm the association between *al-takāthur* and wealth is narrated by Anas ibn Mālik (d. 92/710) from the Prophet, who said, 'If the son of Ādam had a valley of gold (*wāḡin min al-dhahab*), then he would want to have a second one. Nothing will fill his mouth but dust (*wa-lā yamla' fāhu illā l-turāb*). And God accepts the repentance of those who repent' (al-Tirmidhī 2007, vol. 4, p. 368). One notices immediately that this *ḥadīth* contains no reference to *al-takāthur* nor to the sūra in general. In fact, al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) mentions it in the book on *zuhd*, while Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 261/875) includes it in the book on *zakāt* (2007, vol. 3, p. 92). The connection between the two, however, is suggested in a variant of this *ḥadīth*, which belongs to the sub-group of versions that supplement the Prophet's pronouncement with the transmitters' comments on its

ambiguous status—whether it is the Prophet’s saying or part of the Qur’ān (on them, see [Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj 2007](#), vol. 3, pp. 92–94; [Nöldeke 2012](#), pp. 189–94; [Jeffery 1938](#), pp. 61–65). The variant in question is related by Anas ibn Mālik from Ubayy ibn Ka’b (d. 30/650) who said, ‘We were thinking that this *ḥadīth* “If the son of Ādam had two valleys of wealth . . . ” was from the Qur’ān until the sūra ‘*alhākum al-takāthur*’ was revealed ([al-Ṭabarī 1999](#), vol. 12, pp. 678–79). Here, the subtle link between *al-takāthur* and wealth is established through Ubayy’s hint at the similarity in contents between the *ḥadīth* and sūra *al-Takāthur*.

This variant is mentioned in the *tafsīr* of al-Qaysī (d. 437/1045), the Maliki jurist from the Maghrib ([al-Qaysī 2008](#), vol. 12, p. 8416), but it does not appear to be widely circulated in exegetical literature. This is explicitly stated by Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 544/1149), who, after citing it, says that this reliable and beautiful tradition (*naṣṣ ṣaḥīḥ malīḥ*) escaped the commentators (*ghāba ‘an ahl al-tafsīr*). They were ignorant of it and made others ignorant (1958, vol. 4, p. 1962; also, [al-Qurṭubī 1994](#), vol. 19, p. 402).

The association of *al-takāthur* with wealth was known beyond the circles of the exegetes and *ḥadīth* transmitters. It is implied, for example, in the popular work on the interpretations of dreams ascribed to Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/729), which states that whoever dreams that he is reciting sūra *al-Takāthur* ‘will renounce wealth and abstain from its accumulation’ (*kāna zāhidan fī-l-māl wa-tārikan li-jam’ihi*) ([Ibn Sīrīn 1990](#), p. 33).

It is also suggested in an episode from the biography of Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. 32/652), the Companion remembered in the Muslim tradition for his piety, asceticism, and an egalitarian outlook which involved criticising the Muslim ruling elite for their hoarding of wealth and prompted the Caliph ‘Uthmān to recall Abū Dharr from Damascus to Medina and, according to some sources, exile him to al-Rabadha ([Cameron 1973](#)). The episode involving sūra *al-Takāthur* is related by Mālik ibn Aws ibn al-Ḥadathān (d. ca. 91/709), who was in the mosque of Medina when Abū Dharr came to pray there after his arrival from Syria. ‘He greeted me’, says Mālik, ‘and went to the column and prayed two *rak’ahs*, being quick in this. Then, he recited, “*Alhākum al-takāthur*” and people gathered around him’. They asked him to tell them what he had heard from the Prophet and Abū Dharr told them that he heard the Prophet say, ‘there is a tax (*ṣadaqah*) on camels (*al-ibil*), and one on cattle (*al-baqar*), and on wheat (*al-burr*); and whosoever hoards dinars or gold nuggets (*jama’a dīnāran aw tibran*), or silver (*al-fiḍḍah*), does not make it ready for a debtor (*lā yu’idduhu li-gharīm*), and does not spend it in the way of God (*fī sabīl Allāh*), he will be branded with it (*kuwiya bi-hi*)’. Mālik the narrator objected to this, cautioning Abū Dharr to be careful about what he relates on the Prophet’s authority, ‘as this wealth (*al-amwāl*) has already been circulated (*qad fashshat*)’. In response, Abū Dharr, having enquired about Mālik’s lineage, asked him if he has not read Qur’ān 9: 34–35 *Those who treasure up gold and silver, and do not spend them in the way of God—give them the good tidings of a painful chastisement, the day they shall be heated in the fire of Gehenna and therewith their foreheads and their sides and their backs shall be branded* ([al-Dhahabī](#), vol. 2, p. 66). This verse and Abū Dharr’s insistence that it applies to Muslims was reportedly the cause of the controversy between him and the governor of Syria. Abū Dharr’s reciting of sūra *al-Takāthur* as if to draw people’s attention, followed by the warning against hoarding of wealth that he related from the Prophet and the reference to Qur’ān 9:34–35, suggests a strong link between *al-takāthur* and wealth.

(c) *Al-takāthur* as preoccupation with increase or boasting of abundance of wealth and children (*al-takāthur fī-l-amwāl wa-l-awlād*)

The third common association of *al-takāthur* is with wealth and children (*al-takāthur fī-l-amwāl wa-l-awlād*), the phrase that occurs in Qur’ān 57:20, as already mentioned. It has also been attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, who paraphrases Qur’ān 102:1–2 as follows: ‘boasting of your wealth and children (*al-takāthur bi-l-māl wa-l-walad*) preoccupies you until you die and are buried in the graves’ ([al-Baghawī 1987](#), p. 657; [Ibn ‘Abbās 2011](#), vol. 3, p. 1671). A similar interpretation is included in the book of *tafsīr* in al-Bukhārī’s (d. 256/870) *Ṣaḥīḥ* ([al-Bukhārī 1997](#), vol. 6, p. 65), and in the *tafsīr* of al-Wāḥidī as the exegetes’ opinion that *al-takāthur* refers to ‘preoccupation with increase of wealth and children and boasting of their abundance’ (*al-takāthur bi-l-amwāl wa-l-awlād wa-tafākhir bi-kathratihā*) (1994, vol. 4,

p. 548), as well as in the commentaries of al-Māwardī (2020, vol. 6, p. 330), al-Ṭabrisī (1986, vol. 10, p. 812), and al-Zamakhsharī (n.d., vol. 4, p. 791), among others.

However, with few exceptions, the association of *al-takāthur* with wealth and children has rarely been explained or elaborated using extra-Qur'ānic material. It is noteworthy that although al-Baghawī in his commentary on this sūra (1987, vol. 4, p. 520) mentions the tradition related from Anas ibn Mālik, according to which the Prophet said, 'Three things follow the deceased. Two of them return and one remains with him. His family (*ahluhu*), his wealth (*māluhu*) and his deeds (*'amaluhu*) follow him. His family and his wealth return, while his deeds remain with him', he does not connect it to the association of *al-takāthur* with wealth and children.

Outside of *tafsīr* literature, this association might have been reflected, in a subtle way, in an anecdote about the Umayyad Caliph al-Walīd (r. 86/705–96/715), narrated by a certain Mūsā ibn Ḥammād al-Barbarī. Al-Barbarī said that he had seen in the Mosque of Damascus 'a book written in gold in a glass box engraved with sūra *al-Takāthur*' (*kitāban bi-l-dhahab fī l-zujāj mahfūran 'alayhi sūra al-hākum al-takāthur ilā ākhirihā*) and had noticed a red jewel (*jawaharah ḥamrā'*) incrusting (*mulaṣṣaqah*) into the letter *qāf* of the word *maqābir* (the graves). When he asked about it, he was told that al-Walīd had a much-loved daughter to whom this jewel belonged. She died and her mother ordered for the jewel to be buried with her in her grave. Al-Walīd made orders and the jewel ended up in the letter *qāf* of the word *maqābir*. He then swore to her mother that he had put the jewel down in the graves (*al-maqābir*) and she could not say anything to this (Ibn al-Jawzī 1992, vol. 6, p. 287).

These three prevalent definitions of *al-takāthur*—as competition and pride in number, lineage, and glorious deeds; as hoarding of wealth or boasting of its abundance; and as preoccupation with increase or boasting of abundance of wealth and children—have been recognised as independent interpretations. Al-Māwardī, furthermore, ascribes each of them to an early authority: that *al-takāthur* refers to wealth and children is related from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī; that it stands for boasting (*tafākḥur*) of the clans and tribes (*'ashā'ir wa-l-qabā'il*) from Qatādah, and that it refers to preoccupation with the means of subsistence and trade (instead of the hoarding of wealth)—from al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105/723) (al-Māwardī 2020, vol. 6, p. 330; Ibn al-Jawzī 1964, p. 219). The three also occur in combinations, for instance, as boasting of the abundance of wealth and numbers (*al-mubāhāh bi-kathrat al-māl wa-l-'adad*) (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 678; al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 276; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 520) or as 'competition for precedence in wealth, children and numbers altogether' (*al-mufākharah bi-l-amwāl wa-l-awlād wa-l-'adad jumlatan*) (Ibn 'Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī 2001, vol. 5, p. 518). In addition to these three, our sources offer other interpretations of *al-takāthur*, some referring to specific preoccupations, and others to an all-encompassing notion of vanity.

(d) *Al-takāthur* as preoccupation with trade and earning one's living

Identification of *al-takāthur* with 'preoccupation with the means of subsistence and trade' (*al-tashāhul b-l-mā'āsh wa-l-tijārah*) is attributed to al-Ḍaḥḥāk (al-Māwardī 2020, vol. 6, p. 330; al-Qurtubī 1994, vols. 19, 401); and to 'Amr ibn Dīnār who, according to al-Qurtubī, had sworn that this verse was revealed about the merchants (*ḥalafa anna hādhihi l-sūra nazalat fī l-tujjār*).

(e) *Al-takāthur* as overindulgence in various activities

The word *takāthur* can also refer to excessive preoccupation, competition or taking pride in subjects other than lineage, wealth, or children. Some commentators seized on this potential to relate this notion to new contexts and employ it to critique specific activities. One such example is its use in disapproving excessive visits to the graves and their ostentatious decoration by Ibn 'Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī (d. 541/1147). Ibn 'Aṭīyyah mentions in his commentary (2001, vol. 5, p. 518) an anonymous view that *al-takāthur* conveys 'a rebuke for the excessive visits to the graves' (*ta'nīb 'alā l-ikthār min ziyārat al-qubūr*) which distracts one from worshipping God and studying (*'an al-'ibādah wa-l-ta'allum*). The Prophet, he explains, at first prohibited visiting the graves, but then lifted this prohibition

so that the visitors would take a warning from the site of the graves (*li-ma'nā l-itti'āz*), not so that the graves become a site of competition and boasting (*lā li-ma'nā l-mubāhāh wa-l-tafākhur*). Yet, says Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, this is what people do when they are staying at the graves (*fi mulāzamatihī*), raise on them funerary stele of stone and marble (*tasnīmihā bi-l-ḥijārah wa-l-rukḥām*), paint them (*talwīnuhā sharafan*) as a sign of honour, and build cenotaphs (*al-nawāwīs*) upon them.

This theme is taken over from Ibn Aṭīyyah and developed further by Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī (d. 745/1344) (Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī 1993, vol. 8, p. 505). Ibn Aṭīyyah, says Abū Ḥayyān, has only seen the practices of the Andalusian people, if he were to see how the Egyptians compete among themselves and squander their wealth in the greater and lesser Qarāfah cemeteries and the cemetery near the Bāb al-Naṣr, he would have been astonished. Abū Ḥayyān's critique does not stop, however, at the habits of the Egyptians. His other target is a group of wondering Ṣūfīs whom he accuses of taking pride in their visitations of the graves (*al-tabāhī bi-l-ziyārah*). He complains that they have no other preoccupation but with visiting the graves; they tell people about the places they have travelled, and memorise the stories about those buried in the graves—so many that if those stories were committed to writing they would have amounted to books—while, at the same time, they do not know the rules and customs of the ritual ablution (*lā ya'rifūna furūd al-wuḍū' wa-lā sunanahu*). The rulers (*al-mulūk*) and the common people (*al-'awwām*) are enchanted by these Ṣūfīs and generously spend their money on them. When one of them demonstrates to common people some wonderful act, people say that it is a disclosure of mystical knowledge (*fath al-'ilm al-ladunī*). Seeing their popularity, even scholars who have this mystical knowledge started following their path. They would relate many of their stories and combine it with a little of their own knowledge, while seeking money (*al-māl*), status (*al-jāh*) and the kissing of their hand (*taqbūl al-yad*) (Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī 1993, vol. 8, pp. 506–7).

A different example, which associates *al-takāthur* with knowledge comes from the biographical genre, from an anecdote about the Egyptian *ḥadīth* transmitter Ḥamzah ibn Muḥammad Abū l-Qāsim al-Kinānī (d. 357/968). Ḥamzah said that once he had traced nearly two hundred parallel chains of transmission for a single prophetic *ḥadīth* which made him very happy. In his dream, however, he saw the renowned traditionist Yaḥyā ibn Ma'īn (d. 233/847), with whom he shared his story and who cautioned Ḥamzah with the following words, 'I am afraid that this comes under *alhākum al-takāthur*' (al-Dhahabī, vol. 16, p. 180).

#### (f) Towards harmonisation: *al-takāthur* as vanities

The shift from identifying *al-takāthur* with specific deeds towards harmonisation between its different interpretations under a broader category of vanities is also noticeable in our sources. In some cases, this is related to the exegetes' attempts to fill in the perceived gap in the text—the unspecified object of the verb *alhākum* ('diverts you') that would clarify what it is that the addressees of this verse are being diverted from by their preoccupation with *al-takāthur*. Not only could this explain why such a preoccupation is condemned but would also allow to expand the scope of *al-takāthur*'s reference to any activities fitting the context.

The object of *alhākum* is spelled out in various commentaries. For Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (2003, vol. 3, p. 514), *al-takāthur* diverts the addressees from being mindful of the Hereafter ('*an dhikr al-ākhirah*); for al-Ṭabarī (1999, vol. 12, p. 678) and al-Tha'labī (2002, vol. 10, p. 276)—from obedience to their Lord and from that which can deliver them from His wrath ('*an ṭā'at rabbikum wa-'ammā yunḥikum 'an sukhtihī 'alaykum*); for al-Samarqandī (2014, vol. 3, p. 506), it makes one 'forgetful about the bottomless pit and the scorching fire' (*aghfalakum 'an al-ḥāwiyah wa-l-nār al-ḥāmiyah*). Ibn Abī Ḥātim (1999, vol. 10, p. 4459) relates from the Prophet that *al-takāthur* diverts one from obedience ('*an ṭā'ah*); and al-Māwardī (2020, vol. 6, p. 330) lists two options: it makes one forget about obedience to God (*ṭā'at rabbikum*) or diverts one from worshipping the Creator ('*ibādat khāliqikum*). al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 32, p. 77) treats the unspecified object of *alhākum* as a separate question (*al-mas'alah*), explaining why God did not specify it and deliberating over various possible objects.

al-Māturīdī (2005, vol. 10, p. 607) mentions three potential objects: that *al-takāthur* diverts the addressees from accepting the oneness of God (*'an tawḥīd Allāh*); from reflecting on the proofs of the Messenger of God (*'an al-tafakkur fī ḥujaj rasūl Allāh*); and from being mindful of the resurrection (*'an dhikr al-ba'th*). Then, he connects these options with various identifications of *al-takāthur* to create a complex but coherent picture of possible interpretations of the verse, of which he says there are two. First, that this verse tells the addressees about their forefathers and ancestors (*abā'uhum wa-salafuhum*) and about their disgraceful actions (*'an qubḥ ṣanī'ihim*) and preoccupation with foolish things (*ishtighālihim bi-l-safah*), thereby discouraging them from following their ancestors and encouraging to follow the Prophet instead. Their ancestors' disgraceful actions refer to their ingratitude—they were offered a blessing (*ni'mah*) but were ungrateful (*kafarū*) for it and for this reason deserve loathing (*al-maqt*) and punishment (*al-'uqūbah*). The verse, al-Māturīdī adds, could also be a proof (*dalālah*) of the reality of resurrection, as it says that their ancestors who died without correcting their disgraceful actions will be punished for them in the Hereafter. The second possibility is that the subject of this verse are the addressees themselves, not their forefathers, and that God tells them about their own foolishness (*'an safhihim*). Their foolishness, in turn, could refer to boasting of abundance (*al-tafākḥur bi-l-takāthur*) which preoccupies them so that they deny the signs (*āyāt*) given to the Messenger of God. Alternatively, it could refer to taking pride in the way their deceased passed away, or boasting of the abundance of wealth and children which are not of their own doing but a benevolence of God (al-Māturīdī 2005, vol. 10, p. 608). In conclusion, al-Māturīdī says that the rebuke conveyed by this verse applies to both the unbelievers and the believers (*mu'min*) for whom it is a reminder (*tadhkir*) and exhortation (*maw'izah*), and that all the suggested interpretations tell the addressees that everything that diverted them from accepting the oneness of God, reflecting on the proofs of His Messenger, and believing in resurrection was in vain and futile (*kāna 'abathan bāṭilan*). Therefore, ultimately, whichever interpretation of *al-takāthur* one follows, they all stand for vanities that divert a human being from what is most important—the beliefs in oneness of God, the Prophetic mission of Muḥammad, and resurrection.

al-Zamakhsharī (n.d., vol. 4, pp. 791–92) also emphasises vanity and preoccupation with worldly matters in two of his interpretations of *al-takāthur*. First, he says, as a competition in the number of tribesmen, it refers to what is 'of no importance and is not useful for you (*lā ya'nikum wa-lā yujdī 'alaykum*) in this world or the next' and diverts from the matters of religion which are of utmost concern. Second, as a preoccupation with the increase of wealth and children, it distracts people until they die, 'having wasted their lives on the pursuit of this worldly life (*ṭalab al-dunyā*), trying to outdo each other in it (*al-istibāq ilayhā*) and enjoying it until death, while having no other concern except this', from pursuing the Hereafter (*'amal li-ākhiratikum*)

Apart from the *tafsīr* works, the Ḥanbalī jurist and theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350) gives the extended definition of *al-takāthur*, when he explains why God did not name the addressees of this verse—those preoccupied with it (*al-mutakāthir*) (1998, p. 250). It could be, he suggests, either because the verse disapproves of the act itself rather than of the person preoccupied with it, or because the general meaning (*al-iṭlāq*) of the word *al-takāthur* intended to cover all worldly matters that one is preoccupied with or takes pride in (*takāthara*)—such as wealth (*māl*), status (*jāh*), slaves (*'abīd*) and slave-girls (*imā'*), construction (*binā'*), cultivation (*ghirās*), knowledge (*'ilm*) by which one does not seek God, and deeds (*'amal*) that do not bring him closer to God. All these are part of *al-takāthur* that diverts one from God and the Hereafter.

### 3. Medieval Muslim Interpretations of *al-Na'im*

The word *al-na'im* ('comfort, pleasure, blessing, bliss') occurs seventeen times in the Qur'ān, often as Garden or Gardens of Bliss (*jannāt al-na'im*) referring to Paradise, and is associated with the blessings and favours that God bestows on His creation. In sūra *al-Takāthur*, however, *al-na'im* appears as a subject of interrogation on the Day of Judgement.

This potential tension, as well as the abstract meaning of the word *al-na'im*, prompted the commentators to specify what this notion encompasses and what is intended by its use in sūra *al-Takāthur*. As in the case of *al-takāthur*, the interpretations of *al-na'im* were influenced by other Qur'ānic verses that mention the word, and by extra-Qur'ānic materials of various kinds, adduced for the same reason—the occurrence of the word *al-na'im* therein.

(a) *Al-na'im* as food and drink

The identification of *al-na'im* with certain food or drink is traced in our sources to the pronouncements of the Prophet Muḥammad and early Muslim authorities. Most cited among them is a story of a banquet that the Prophet and his Companions enjoyed at the house of Abū l-Haytham ibn al-Tayyihān al-Anṣārī, which ended with the Prophet announcing that the food and drink (and the shade) that the company enjoyed are among the pleasures (*al-na'im*) about which they will be questioned on the Day of Judgement.

One version of this story, related from Abū Hurayrah (d. 58/677), runs as follows: The Prophet said to Abū Bakr and 'Umar, 'Let us go to Abū l-Haytham ibn al-Tayyihān al-Anṣārī's', and they did so. Abū l-Haytham took them to the shade of his garden and spread out a rug for them, then he went to a palm-tree and brought a bunch of dates. The Prophet asked him, 'Why didn't you just hand-pick for us some fresh dates from it?' 'I wanted you to choose from among the fresh and the unripe ones', replied Abū l-Haytham. They ate and drank water, and when the Messenger of God finished, he said, 'This, I swear by the One in whose hand is my soul, is from the pleasures (*min al-na'im*) about which you will be asked on the Day of Judgment—this cool shade, cool fresh dates, and in addition, cool water' (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, pp. 681–82).

Details of this story vary significantly across the sources (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, pp. 681–82; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 521; al-Ṭabrisī 1986, vol. 10, p. 813; Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1999, vol. 10, p. 3461), as do the details of the banquet therein—from a modest refreshment of dates and water to a banquet with a bunch of dates cut from the date-palm, a she-sheep slaughtered, and bread freshly made. The food and drink that the company enjoyed include, in different versions: fresh dates (*rutab*) and water (*mā'*) (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 681); unripe dates (*busr*) and cold water (*mā' bārid*) (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 682); fresh and dry dates and meat of a sheep or of an unspecified animal (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 280; al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 681); shade of a garden, fresh and dry dates and cool water (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 682; Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1999, vol. 10, p. 3461); wheat bread (*khubz al-burr*), chilled water (*al-mā' al-mubarrad*) and shade (*zill*) (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 279). The culmination of the story, however, is the same—it is the Prophet's pronouncement that identifies the food and drink they enjoyed as *al-na'im*, and in some versions this is the end of the story (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1999, vol. 10, p. 3461; al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, pp. 681–82).

A combination of dates and water as *al-na'im* has also been traced to the *ḥadīth* about the two black things (*al-aswadāni*), related by Ibn al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām (d. 73/693) from his father. According to it, when Qur'ān 102:8 was revealed, al-Zubayr asked the Prophet, 'Oh Messenger of God, which are the pleasures (*al-na'im*) we will be questioned about, when these pleasures are [only] the two black things (*al-aswadāni*)—dry dates (*tamr*) and water (*al-mā'*)?' The Prophet replied, 'But it is what shall come' (al-Tirmidhī 2007, vol. 6, p. 89; Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1999, vol. 10, p. 3461; other variants in al-Tirmidhī 2007, vol. 6, p. 88; al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 682; Ibn al-'Arabī 1958, vol. 4, p. 1963).

Among the food and drink featured in the banquet story, cold water (*al-mā' al-bārid*) is sometimes singled out as the sole identification of *al-na'im* (al-Ṭūsī 1963, vol. 10, p. 403; al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 83). al-Tha'labī (2002, vol. 10, p. 278) gives prominence to it more than other exegetes, citing in his commentary several reports in praise of cold water. For example, that the Prophet himself explained that *al-na'im* means 'cold water' (*al-mā' al-bārid*), as related from Abū Hurayrah. He also includes a report from Anas ibn Mālik that once the Prophet stayed as a guest at al-Miqdād ibn al-Aswād's (d. 33/655) who offered him food and cold water. The Prophet found it delightful (*istaṭābahu*) and recommended that his Companions should drink the coldest water they could. When asked why, he explained that cold water is best for the stomach, most beneficial for sickness and better

motivates one to be grateful (*ab'athu 'alā al-shukr*). A similar sentiment is attributed to Abū Ḥātim (d. 260s/870s) who said that fresh cold water evokes praise (*yastakhriju al-ḥamd*) from the depth of one's heart, while 'Abdallāh ibn 'Umar (d. 73/693) identified *al-na'im* with cold water in summer (*huwa al-mā' al-bārid fī-l-ṣayf*). For al-Tha'labī, the proof for *al-na'im*'s identification with cold water is the tradition according to which the first question that God will ask His servant on the Day of Judgement is, 'Have I not made your body healthy and given you cold water to drink?' Finally, al-Tha'labī includes a story narrated by Mālik ibn Dīnār (d. ca. 130/747) about a certain man telling al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) about his neighbour who did not eat *fālūd*, a dish of wheat and honey, because he could not take it upon himself to be grateful for it. Al-Ḥasan answered that the neighbour did not know that God's blessing him (*ni'mah 'alayhi*) with cold water is greater than with all the sweets.

A combination of wheat bread, water and shade as *al-na'im* has been attributed, apart from the Prophet, to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (al-Samarqandī 2014, vol. 3, p. 507; Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1999, vol. 10, p. 3460), Abū Umāmah (d. 86/700) (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 683) and Abū Ma'mar 'Abdallāh ibn Sakhbarah who, as reported from Mujāhid (d. 103/721), said, 'There is no one in Kufa who does not live in comfort (*mā aṣbaḥa aḥad bi-l-Kūfah illā nā'imān*). The lowliest of them in livelihood eats wheat bread (*khubz al-burr*), drinks water of the Euphrates (*mā' al-Furāt*) and is protected by the shade (*yastazillu min al-zill*), and these are among the pleasures (*al-na'im*)' (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, pp. 682–83).

Besides the food and drink from the banquet story, *al-na'im* has also been identified with honey (*'asal* or *sharbat 'asal*). Across the sources, this is ascribed exclusively to Sa'īd ibn Jubayr (d. 95/714) who, according to Bukayr ibn 'Atīq, when he was given a drink of honey (*sharbat 'asal*), said, 'This is from the pleasures (*min al-na'im*) about which you will be questioned' (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, pp. 681, 683). In another version, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr also explains his identification, saying, 'I have drunk it with pleasure (*astalidhdhuhu*)' (2011, vol. 6, p. 463). Honey is also included in a rare combination of food that the Prophet mentioned, as reported by Abū Qilābah (d. 104/722), when he said that the addressees of the *al-na'im* verse were 'some people of my community who combine clarified butter and honey with white bread (*ya'qidūna al-samn wal-'asal bi-l-naqī*) and eat this' (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 280).

Finally, there are reports that leave the type of food and drink unspecified. For example, 'Urwah ibn Muḥammad related that he and others were in the company of Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. ca. 113/731) when they saw a man who was deaf (*aṣammu*), blind (*a'mā*), crippled (*mu'aqqad*), leprous (*majdhūm*) and sick (*muṣāb*). They asked Wahb if there were any pleasures (*min al-na'im*) left for a person like him, and Wahb replied that it was the satisfaction of his appetite with food and drink and the ease with which he can obtain these when he goes out to do so (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282). It has also been reported from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī that *al-na'im* refers to breakfast and supper (*al-ghadā' wa-l-ishā'*) (al-Māwardī 2020, vol. 6, p. 332; Ibn al-'Arabī 1958, vol. 4, p. 1962); and from Jābir ibn 'Abdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 78/698) that it includes 'the delicacies of food and drink' (*al-malādhdh al-ma'kūl wa-l-mashrūb*) (al-Māwardī 2020, vol. 6, p. 332).

(b) *Al-na'im* as the combination of food and drink with clothing, shelter, sleep, horse-riding, and servant-owning

In references to *al-na'im*, food and drink also appear in combinations with other items. One pairing is of cold water with sandals. It has been reported from 'Ikrimah (d. 105/723) (2011, vol. 7, p. 366) that after the verse about *al-na'im* was revealed, the Companions asked the Prophet, 'Oh Messenger of God, what are the pleasures that we are enjoying (*wa-ayy na'im naḥnu fīhi*), while we only eat barley bread to the half of our stomachs (*wa-innamā na'kulu fī anṣāf buṭūninā khubz al-sha'īr*)?' And God revealed (*awḥā*) to His Prophet, 'Tell them, are you not wearing sandals (*al-ni'āl*) and drinking cold water (*al-mā' al-bārid*)?' In one variant of this tradition the Prophet also confirms, 'These are from the pleasures (*hādihā min al-na'im*)' (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1999, vol. 10, pp. 3460–62; al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, pp. 280–81).

It has also been related from Anas ibn Mālik that when the *al-na'im* verse was revealed, a needy person (*rajul muhtāj*) came to ask the Prophet if he, a needy person, had any pleasures to enjoy (*hal 'alayya min al-ni'mah shay'*). The Prophet replied, 'Yes, the sandals (*al-na'lān*), the shade (*al-zill*) and the cold water (*al-mā' al-bārid*)' (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 281; al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 81).

Food is paired with horse-riding in the pronouncement ascribed to 'Abdallāh ibn al-Muzanī (d. ca. 151/768), 'Oh what a pleasure eating delicacies and riding on a saddle! (*yā ayyuhā min ni'mah ya'kulu ladhdhah wa-yakhruju sarjan*)' (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282). It is mentioned together with a garment and a servant (*al-khādim*) in the tradition related from al-Hajī' ibn Qays, who asked the Prophet about what would be sufficient for the son of Adam in this world. The Prophet replied, 'That which satisfies your hunger and covers your private parts, and whoever has a servant (*man kāna la-hu khādim*)—therein is a comfort (*fa-hunāka al-na'im*), therein is a comfort indeed' (Ibn al-'Arabī 1958, vol. 4, p. 1964).

Additionally, a combination of the following five things has been equated by the Prophet with *al-na'im* about which one will be questioned on the Day of Judgement, as reported from Ibn 'Abbās: fullness of the stomachs (*shab' al-buṭūn*), cold drinks (*bārid al-sharāb*), pleasures of sleep (*ladhdhat al-nawm*), shade of the dwellings (*zilāl al-masākin*) and moderation of character (*i'tidāl al-khulq*)' (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 281; al-Māwardī 2020, vol. 6, p. 332; al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 82). Al-Rāzī also mentions another report from Ibn 'Abbās that combines all the delicacies of food and drink (*sā'ir malādhdh al-ma'kul wa-l-mashrūb*) with health (*al-ṣiḥḥah*).

(c) *Al-na'im* as health, safety, wellbeing, senses of perception, leisure and their combinations

Another cluster of interpretations of *al-na'im* covers the notions of health and wellbeing, senses of perception, leisure and their various combinations. *Al-na'im* is identified with safety and health (*al-amn wa-l-ṣiḥḥah*) in the works of al-Farrā' (1972, vol. 3, p. 288); Ibn Qutaybah (1958, p. 537); al-Ṭabarī (1999), who relates it from several early Muslim authorities; Ibn Abī Ḥātim (1999, vol. 10, p. 3460), who traces it to the Prophet; al-Tha'labī (2002, vol. 10, p. 279), al-Samarqandī (2014, vol. 3, p. 507), al-Māwardī (2020, vol. 6, p. 332), al-Ṭabrisī (1986) and al-Baghawī (1987, vol. 4, p. 522), among others.

al-Ṭūsī (1963, vol. 10, p. 403) mentions the interpretation of *al-na'im* as health (*al-ṣiḥḥah*) from Mujāhid and Ibn Mas'ud; while Ibn al-'Arabī (1958, vol. 4, p. 1963) and al-Qurṭubī (1994, vol. 19, p. 408) relate from Mālik that it refers to bodily health and cheerful spirits (*ṣiḥḥat al-badan wa-ṭayyib al-nafs*). Ibn 'Arabī notes, however, that many scholars think that Mālik took this from the wise sayings of Luqmān, among them the one addressed to his son: 'There are no riches like health (*laysa ghinan ka-ṣiḥḥah*) and no blessings like cheerful spirits (*lā na'im ka-ṭayyib al-nafs*)'.

*Al-na'im* has also been identified with wellbeing (*al-'āfiyah*) (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 681; al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282; al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 82), welfare (*al-salāmah*) (Ibn al-'Arabī 1958, vol. 4, p. 1962), and with a combination of sleep (*al-nawm*), safety (*al-amn*) and wellbeing (*wa-l-'āfiyah*) (al-Qurṭubī 1994, vol. 19, p. 408).

A pairing of health with leisure (*al-ṣiḥḥah wa-l-farāgh*) as *al-na'im* is also frequent. It is attributed to 'Ikrimah and Sa'īd ibn Jubayr ('Ikrimah 2011, vol. 7, p. 366; al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282), and is indicated, according to al-Tha'labī, in the Prophet's saying, reported by Ibn 'Abbās, 'Many people are neglectful (*maghbūn*) of the two blessings—health and leisure (*al-ṣiḥḥah wa-l-farāgh*)' (also al-Bukhārī 1997, vol. 8, p. 81; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 522; al-Ṭabrisī 1986, vol. 10, p. 812). Ibn Mas'ūd is credited with identifying *al-na'im* with safety, health, and leisure (*al-amn wa-l-ṣiḥḥah wa-l-farāgh*) (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 82).

Senses of perception has been another suggested interpretation. al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 32, p. 812) mentions in his commentary an anonymous view that *al-na'im* refers to 'perception by hearing and sight' (*bi-idrāk al-sam' wa-l-baṣr*). While Ibn 'Abbās is said to identify it with 'health of the body, hearing and vision' (*ṣiḥḥat al-abdān wa-l-asmā' wa-l-abṣār*), explaining that on the Day of Judgment, God will ask humankind how they have used these blessings, while He knows this better than they do, as said in Qur'an 17:36 *And pursue not that you have no knowledge of; the hearing, the sight, the heart—all of those shall be questioned of* (Ibn

'Abbās 2011, vol. 3, p. 1671; Ibn 'Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī 2001, vol. 5, p. 519; also al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, pp. 680–81; Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1999, vol. 10, p. 3460).

(d) *Al-na'īm* as material comforts

That *al-na'īm* refers to material comforts is implied in the commentary of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (2003, vol. 3, p. 515). According to him, the *al-na'īm* verse speaks about the Meccan unbelievers (*kuffār Makkah*) who were enjoying wealth (*al-khayr*) and comfort (*al-ni'mah*) in this life (*fi l-dunyā*) and will be questioned about their ingratitude for these comforts on the Day of Judgement, as said in Qur'ān 46:20 *You dissipated your good things in your present life, and you took your enjoyment in them; therefore today you shall be recompensed with the chastisement of humiliation for that you waxed proud in the earth without right, and for your ungodliness*. In their dialogue with God, as rendered by Muqātil, God addresses them as 'people of the carpets (*farsh*), cushions (*wasā'id*) and comfort in this life (*al-ni'mah fi dār al-dunyā*)'.

Al-Rāzī gives several indications in his commentary (1981, vol. 32, pp. 81–83) that *al-na'īm* relates to material comforts. This is implied, for instance, in 'Umar's reported question to the Prophet about the comforts (*al-na'īm*) they will be questioned on the Day of Judgement, while, he says, 'we have left our houses and our wealth (*akhrajnā min diyārinā wa-amwālinā*)'. It is also suggested in a story about a youth who embraced Islam during the Prophet's time, and whom the Prophet taught sūra *al-Takāthur* before arranging his marriage. When that youth came to his bride and saw the great trousseau (*al-jihāz al-'aẓīm*) and great comforts (*al-na'īm al-kathīr*) he went away saying he did not want this. When the Prophet asked him why, the youth replied, 'Have you not taught me "and on this day you will be asked about *al-na'īm*"? And I cannot bear answering this'. Al-Rāzī also mentions a saying ascribed to the Prophet that on the Day of Resurrection God's servant will not move forward until he has been questioned about four things: his life (*'an 'umrihi*)—how he has spent it, his youth (*'an shabābihi*)—to what use he put it; his wealth (*'an mālihi*)—how he gained and spent it, and his knowledge (*'an 'ilmihī*)—what he has done with it' (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, pp. 81, 83; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 1998, p. 256).

Similarly, it is related from Ibn 'Umar that he heard the Prophet say that on the Day of Judgement God will call His servant, make him stand before Him and ask him about his destitution (*'an ḥājatihi*) and about his wealth (*'an mālihi*) (al-Qurṭubī 1994, vol. 19, p. 408). Occasionally, material wealth is combined with other things, for example, with health (*al-ṣiḥḥah*) and leisure (*al-farāgh*), as ascribed to Sa'īd ibn Jubayr (2011, vol. 6, p. 463; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 522).

(e) *Al-na'īm* as pleasures of the *ḥammām*

A few of our sources also mention the association of *al-na'īm* with the enjoyment of the hot steam bath (*ḥammām*). It is attributed to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, whose son reported him as saying, 'Do not enter the *ḥammām*, verily it is among the pleasures they have introduced (*min al-na'īm alladhī aḥdathūhu*)' (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 680). Al-Tha'labī adds that Maṣū'ūr, one of the transmitters of this report, did not enter the *ḥammām*. Al-Ṭūsī specifies 'Umar's interpretation of *al-na'īm* as 'the use of a depilatory agent (*al-nūrah*) in the *ḥammām*' (1963, vol. 10, p. 403).

Outside of the *tafsīr* genre, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/998) includes 'Umar's interpretation in his work (al-Makkī 1996, pp. 497–98), and also mentions another possibility, namely that *al-na'īm* refers to 'hot water in winter' (*al-mā' al-ḥārr fi-l-shitā'*), adding that there is no objection if a man rubs it with his own hand over his body except for his private parts.

Another tradition, rarely cited in our sources, also connects *al-na'īm* to bodily care. It is related by Mu'ādh (d. 18/640) from the Prophet, who said that on the Day of Judgement God's servant will be questioned, 'even about the kohl on his eyelids, remains of clay on his fingertips, and about touching the garment of his brother' (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 81).

(f) *Al-na'īm* as Islam, God's sending of the Prophet and making easier the prescriptions of *shar'ah* and the Qur'ān

Several interpretations of *al-na'im*, understanding this word as 'blessing' rather than 'pleasure', refer it to Islam and God's sending of His Messenger as blessings that God has bestowed (*an'ama*) on His creation. It has been reported from Muḥammad ibn Ka'b (d. 118/736) that on the Day of Resurrection people will be questioned about the Prophet Muḥammad whose sending is God's blessing to them (*an'ama 'alaykum bi-Muḥammad*) (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 522; al-Qurṭubī 1994, vol. 19, p. 409). The proof for such an interpretation, al-Tha'labī adds, is Qur'ān 16:84 *They recognize the blessing of God, then they deny it*. It has also been related from Abū l-'Āliyah (d. 96/714) that *al-na'im* refers to 'Islam and traditions' (*al-islām wa-l-sunan*) (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 522); and from al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Faḍl, al-Mufaḍḍal and al-Ḥasan that it refers to making easier the prescriptions of the *sharī'ah* and the Qur'ān (*takhfīf al-sharā'i' wa-taysīr al-Qur'ān*) (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 521; al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 82; al-Māwardī 2020, vol. 6, p. 332; al-Qurṭubī 1994, vol. 19, p. 409).

Identification of *al-na'im* with the Prophet Muḥammad is also ascribed by al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 32, p. 82) to the fifth Shī'ite Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 113/731), as related from his companion Jābir ibn Yazīd al-Ju'fī (d. 128/746). According to this report, when Muḥammad al-Bāqir asked al-Ju'fī what the leading commentators say about *al-na'im*, he told him that they say it refers to shade and cold water. Al-Bāqir asked him, 'If someone were to come to your house and you offered him a seat in the shade and cold water to drink, [does it mean] you have bestowed a favour upon him (*a tamunnu 'alayhi*)?' 'No', answered al-Ju'fī. 'And God is more generous than [first] giving His servant food and drink and then questioning him about it', said al-Bāqir. When al-Ju'fī asked about al-Bāqir's interpretation, he answered that it refers to the Messenger of God with whom He has blessed (*an'ama bi-hi*) this world and saved people from going astray, as mentioned in Qur'ān 3:164 *Truly God was gracious (manna) to the believers when He raised up among them a Messenger from themselves*.

(g) *Al-na'im* as God's sending of the Prophet and his family (*ahl al-bayt*)

That *al-na'im* as God's blessing to humankind is not limited to the Prophet but extends to the Prophet's family, devotion to whom (*walāyah*), therefore, becomes the subject of questioning on the Day of Judgment, is mentioned by several Shī'ite commentators. Al-Qummī (3rd/9th century) (al-Qummī 1967, vol. 2, p. 440), for example, glosses *al-na'im* as *walāyah* and cites Qur'ān 37:24 that talks about the questioning of sinners on the Day of Judgement as the proof. He also relates the interpretation of *al-na'im* by the sixth Imam Abū Abdallāh Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), related by Jamīl, 'This community will be questioned about the Messenger of God and the infallible people of his house (*ahl baytihi al-ma'sūmūna*), with whom God has blessed (*an'ama*) them'.

al-Ṭabrisī (1986, vol. 10, p. 813) relates a tradition from al-'Ayyāshī (4th/10th century) which puts Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's interpretation in context. It says that during his conversation with Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767) about *al-na'im*, Abū Ḥanīfah said that it referred to nourishment (*al-qūt*) of food and cold water. To this al-Ṣādiq said, 'If God were to make you stand (*awqafaka*) before Him on the Day of Judgement to question you about every food and drink that you have eaten and drunk, then you will be standing before Him for a long time indeed (*la-yaṭūlanna wuqūfuka bayna yadayhi*)'. When Abū Ḥanīfah asked about al-Ṣādiq's interpretation, he replied, 'We, people of the house (*ahl al-bayt*), are the blessing (*al-na'im*) that God has bestowed on His servants. Through us they have been unified after disagreement, through us God has reconciled their hearts and made them brothers after their enmity, and through us God has guided them to Islam. This is the blessing (*al-ni'mah*) that does not come to an end. God will question them about the true blessing (*ḥaqq al-na'im*) that He has bestowed on them, and this is the Prophet and his offspring (*al-nabiyy wa-'itratihī*). al-Ṭūsī (1963, vol. 10, p. 403) mentions in his commentary that *al-na'im* refers to 'devotion to 'Alī' (*walāyat 'Alī*).

(h) *Al-na'im* as all the worldly pleasures

Among these different interpretations of *al-na'im*, one covers all the worldly pleasures. It has been attributed to the Prophet who said that, 'One will be asked about every comfort (*kull na'im*), except for the comfort [spent] in the way of God (*na'im fi sabīl Allāh*)' (Ibn 'Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī 2001, vol. 5, p. 519); and to Mujāhid (d. 104/722) (Mujāhid 2011, vol. 5, p. 953) who said that *al-na'im* refers to 'all things from among the pleasures of this world' (*kull min shay' min ladhdhat al-dunyā*). Above all, this is implied in a widely circulated *ḥadīth* of the three exceptions—three things about which, according to the Prophet, one will not be questioned on the Day of Judgement, with the assumption that everything else will have to be accounted for. The three exceptions *ḥadīth* occurs in different versions in our sources. al-Farrā' (1972, vol. 3, p. 288) reports that the Prophet said, 'A Muslim will not be questioned about three things: food (*ṭa'ām*) that sustains his body, clothing (*tha'wab*) that covers his private parts, and a dwelling (*bayt*) that shelters him from heat and cold'. al-Tirmidhī (2007, vol. 4, p. 90) in the book on *zuhd* has another version, 'There is no right for the son of Ādam except in these properties (*khiṣāl*): a house (*bayt*) where he lives, a garment (*tha'wab*) which covers his private parts, and dry bread (*jilf al-khubz*) and water (*al-mā'*'. Additionally, al-Tha'labī (2002, vol. 10, p. 281) reports from Yaḥyā ibn Abī Kathīr (d. 132/750) that the Prophet was reading *sūra al-Takāthur* to his Companions and upon reaching the verse that mentions *al-na'im* asked them, 'Do you know what this *al-na'im* is?' 'God and His Messenger know best', they replied. The Prophet then said, 'A house (*bayt*) that shades you, a ragged garment (*khirqah*) that covers your private parts, and a piece of bread (*kisrah*) that sustains you, and [anything] other than this is *al-na'im*'.

Reflecting the same tendency towards harmonisation of different interpretations, as is the case of *al-takāthur*, this all-encompassing interpretation of *al-na'im* often comes as the commentators' preferred variant. al-Ṭabarī (1999, vol. 12, pp. 680–83), for example, lists five suggested interpretations of *al-na'im*: as safety and health; hearing, sight and bodily health; well-being; certain food and drink; and, finally, everything that a human being enjoys in this world (*kull mā iltadhdhahu al-insān fi-l-dunyā*). The last option is al-Ṭabarī's own preference, which he considers right (*al-ṣawāb*), because God did not specify in this verse any particular kind of pleasure to the exclusion of others. God's message covers all (*al-jamī'*) the pleasures and, therefore, on the Day of Judgement He will be questioning His servants about all the pleasures, not just some of them (see also al-Qaysi 2008, vol. 12, p. 8422; Ibn al-Jawzī 1964, pp. 222–23; al-Qurṭubī 1994, vol. 19, p. 409).

al-Rāzī's (1981, vol. 32, p. 82) list of possible identifications of *al-na'im* reaches nine options. He too gives his preference to the one which refers to all the pleasures ('*alā jamī' al-ni'am*), deeming it most appropriate (*al-awḷā*). He furthermore justifies this choice by several arguments. First, he says, the use of the definite article *al-* in *al-na'im* implies that the meaning of *na'im* is all-encompassing. Second, that it is better to consider *al-na'im* as referring to all, rather than any one of its components, especially since there is a proof that this verse refers to the worldly pleasures that divert one from worshipping God. Third, he says, when God told the Israelites to remember His blessing (*ni'matī*) in Qur'ān 2:40, this referred to all of His blessings to them. Lastly, says al-Rāzī, a full blessing (*al-na'im al-tāmm*) is like one thing that consists of different parts, and when one refers to *al-na'im* one refers to all of them, while it is impossible to enumerate all kinds of blessings, as it is said in Qur'ān 16:18 *If you should count God's blessing, you will never number it*.

#### 4. Moral Visions in the Interpretations of *Sūra al-Takāthur*

What do these different interpretations of *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im* tell us about the moral orientations envisaged in medieval works of *tafsīr*?

First, their diversity itself suggests that the moral injunctions of the Qur'ānic text were not perceived by the commentators as given and unequivocal. They needed to be articulated and justified, relying not only on the meanings of the words *takāthur* and *na'im* and their usage in the Qur'ān, but also drawing on extra-Qur'ānic materials, including the prophetic *ḥadīths*, pronouncements of early Muslim authorities, and stories that circulated in the milieu of the early Muslim preachers. The rationale behind the disapproval of

*al-takāthur* and *al-na'im* had to be explained and their diverse interpretations had to be made consistent with each other and with the prevalent theological discourses.

The diverse interpretations suggested for *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im* presume different moral vices that sūra *al-Takāthur* was thought to be censuring—pride, personal and collective (taken in people, possessions and qualities), self-indulgence, avarice, vanity, gourmandising, and ingratitude. The commentators' emphasis on some of these interpretations and the vices they entail, while silencing others, and specifying, negotiating, or objecting to others reveals the dynamics in the moral orientations they envisaged.

One layer of material in our sources seemingly relates the notions of *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im* to the ideals of the early Muslim renunciant piety, as analysed by Christopher Melchert (2020). This other-worldly piety, according to Melchert, reflected the ethos of the conquest period, but could not be followed on a large scale in the post-conquest period, and was eventually displaced by the 4th/10th century by a more world-affirming vision of piety. The identifications of *al-takāthur*, and especially of *al-na'im* ascribed to the Prophet and the early Muslim authorities in our sources refer in particular to the physical austerities associated with the early Muslim renunciants (for these, see Melchert 2020, pp. 20–41). Their disapproval of eating to satiety, for example, resonates with the designation of such staple food as dates and water as the subject of questioning on the Day of Judgement, let alone such delicacies as wheat bread, clarified butter, meat and honey. It is also reflected in the identification of *al-na'im* as 'lunch and supper' attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. References to material comforts, bodily care, such as the use of *ḥammām*, to sleep and concerns with earning one's living, all point in the same direction. Most evidently, however, the renunciants' ideal is reflected in the *ḥadīth* of the three exceptions which extends the notion of *al-na'im* (and, therefore, the scope of questioning on the Day of Judgement) to everything beyond the bare necessities of life—food and drink to sustain one's body, a garment to cover one's private parts and a dwelling to seek protection from heat and cold. Some versions of this *ḥadīth* furthermore limit the exceptions to two, as in the dramatic episode from the banquet story, where in response to the Prophet's announcement that the food the company enjoyed is part of *al-na'im*, 'Umar takes the bunch of the unripe dates which have been served to them, strikes the ground with it so that the dates scatter around and asks, 'Oh Messenger of God, will we be asked about this? (*innanā la-mas'ulūna 'an ḥādihā*)?' 'Yes', answers the Prophet, 'except for a morsel of bread with which one satisfies one's hunger and a den (*juḥr*) which he enters because of heat or cold' (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 682; al-Ṭabrisī 1986, vol. 10, pp. 812–13). Furthermore, in another version, reported from Thābit al-Bunānī (d. 123/741 or 127/745), the three exceptions themselves become part of *al-na'im* when the Prophet explains that *al-na'im* about which one will be questioned on the Day of Resurrection includes a crust of bread (*kisrah*) that nourishes him, water (*mā'*) that satisfies his thirst, and a garment (*tha'wab*) that covers him' (al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 683; al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282; Ibn 'Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī 2001, vol. 5, p. 519).

However, these references reflecting the moral orientations and habits of the early Muslim renunciants, although preserved, seem to be treated in our sources as part of heritage rather than topics of immediate concern and profound implications for the discussion of moral injunctions in sūra *al-Takāthur*. They rarely elicit comments to that effect, and some are passed in silence, as is the case of pleasures of the *ḥammām*. A subject of controversy early in the post-conquest period, be it due to its foreign origin or the decoration of its interiors (Sourdel-Thomine and Louis 2012), it seemed no longer relevant to our authors, with *ḥammām* now being omnipresent throughout the Islamic world. Similarly, the identification of *al-takāthur* with earning one's living and trade, despite being a topic of early debates (Goitein 1957; Kinberg 1989) appears of little concern to our authors.

When the authors do comment on the pronouncements pointing to other-worldly piety, it is usually to explain their rationale and to align them with the concerns of a more world-affirming moral vision, which underlines internal manifestations of piety, especially

the necessity of God-mindfulness and of gratitude to God as the source of all blessings and comforts.

An example of this is the explanation of *al-na'im*'s identification with water and health by linking it to gratitude in the previously mentioned *ḥadīth* about the first question that God will ask His servant on the Day of Judgement, 'Did We not make your body healthy for you and give you cold water to drink?' (al-Tirmidhī 2007, vol. 6, p. 90; al-Ṭabarī 1999, vol. 12, p. 682; al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 278; al-Baghawī 1987, vol. 4, p. 522). al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 32, p. 82) also tried to clarify why cold water was singled out as *al-na'im*. According to him, it stands for a general concept (*min jumlatihi*) but has been singled out perhaps because it is of little importance when available and of greatest importance when not, or because the inhabitants of Hell seek water more than anything else, or because this *sūra* was revealed about the rich (*nazalat fī l-mutrafin*) who are described as possessors of cold water and shade.

Definitions of *al-na'im* as food and drink have also caused some unease, as seen in their questioning by the two Shī'ite Imams: one pointing to the cumbersome arrangement they suggest for the Day of Judgement—that on that day God will be questioning every person about every food and drink they consumed during their lifetimes; the other implicating that they compromise God's generosity. Both offered the same alternative—namely, that *al-na'im* refers to the Prophet and his family. In most sources, however, food, like water, has been linked to the gratitude that a human being owes to God for His blessings.

Similarly, the identification of *al-takāthur* with boasting of wealth and children has been explained by al-Māturīdī (2005, vol. 10, p. 608) as a lack of humility and a failure to acknowledge that these are not of one's own doing, but graces from God (*min lutf Allāh*); while al-Zamakhsharī (n.d., vol. 4, pp. 791–92), as we have seen, considered it as part of the overall pursuit of worldly pleasures which distract one from good deeds that would benefit one in the Hereafter.

The second observation regarding the interpretations of *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im* in our sources is that not all of the suggested interpretations and the vices implied therein, have been unanimously accepted. Efforts to negotiate the boundaries between the censured and the tolerated through nuanced definitions, supplied contexts, suggested compensatory actions, citing proof-texts to the contrary, or limiting their application to specific groups, are apparent in our sources. In what follows, these efforts will be illustrated by three examples—those of food, wealth, and pride.

Food, as we have seen, was an often mentioned interpretation of *al-na'im*. Part of the pre-Islamic Bedouin virtues of generosity and hospitality that brought fame and honour to the host, in the Qur'ān it is associated with God's blessings to His creation and with the prohibition of certain foods (van Gelder 2000). Various foods and drinks, including dates, water, and honey that feature among the identifications of *al-na'im*, have been praised in the Qur'ān and traditions (Waines 2002), while fasting, eating little, and avoiding certain food are associated with the habits of the early renunciants (Melchert 2020). In our sources, discussion around food focuses not on the question of eating to satiety or prohibition of certain foods, but rather on the attitudes towards gourmandising, and perhaps, in cases like the pure wheat bread which was associated with the diet of the affluent urban population long after the conquest (Pellah 2012), also with affluence.

Attitudes to gourmandising are negotiated in our sources through specifying the conditions which render the enjoyment of good food acceptable, particularly the expression of gratitude for it, and also through suggesting that the Qur'ānic injunction against it is directed at the unbelievers and does not concern Muslims.

Among the different forms that gratitude can take, in the case of food, it is a verbal expression of gratitude to God by pronouncing 'Praise be to God' (*al-ḥamd li-llāh*). This features in several alternative endings to the banquet story. In one version, related from al-Kalbī, after the Prophet's announcement that the dates and cold water that He and his company enjoyed is part of *al-na'im*, his Companions ask, 'But what is the gratitude for this (*fa-mā shukruhā*), oh Messenger of God?' 'That you should say "praise be to God"', replies

the Prophet (al-Farrā' 1972, vol. 3, p. 288). In another version (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 280), gratitude for the delicious food is expressed to both God and the host. According to this version, during the banquet the Prophet and his Companions 'ate their fill and praised God' (*fa-akalū wa-sharibū wa-ḥamidū Allāh*), and at the end of it the Prophet gave to the hosts his salutations (*sallama 'alayhum*) and invoked blessings upon them (*da'ā la-hum bi-l-khayr*).

That gratitude by verbally praising God absolves one from accountability for their enjoyment of good food is reported from Ibrāhīm, who said, 'whoever invokes God while eating and praises God when he has finished (*akala fa-sammā Allāh wa-faragha fa-ḥamida Allāh*), will not be questioned about his enjoyment of this food (*lam yus'al 'an na'im dhālika al-ṭa'ām*)' (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 282).

The conditions under which enjoying lavish food becomes acceptable are specified by Ibn 'Arabī as gratitude and obedience to God (Ibn al-'Arabī 1958, vol. 4, p. 1965). His reader is prepared for this conclusion by two traditions that precede it. First, Ibn 'Arabī cites the version of the banquet story, related from al-Bayhaqī, which avoids the Prophet's pronouncement about *al-na'im*, and instead ends with the Prophet giving to Abū l-Haytham a captive Yemenite as a servant, whom Abū l-Haytham soon sets free. The second tradition is narrated by 'Akrāsh ibn Dhu'ayb who upon delivering to the Prophet the *sadaqah* from Banū Murrah ibn 'Abīd, was invited to the house of Umm Salamah and offered a bowl of *tharīd*—a dish of bread and meat broth, and some fat (*wadak*), followed by a plate of various kinds of dates, while the Prophet was instructing 'Akrāsh how he should eat those dishes (Ibn al-'Arabī 1958, vol. 4, p. 1966). These traditions, Ibn 'Arabī concludes, indicate (*yadullu*) that a man is allowed to eat lavish food and enjoy it (*yajūzu an yatawassa' fī-l-ṭa'ām wa-yataladhhadha*) while he invokes God, gives praise to Him, and does not spend the energy gained thereby on disobeying God.

A different strategy is to suggest that questioning about the enjoyment of good food on the Day of Judgement does not apply to Muslims, but only concerns the unbelievers. It is reflected in the tradition reported from Ibn 'Abbās that Abū Bakr asked the Prophet about the meal (*aklah*) they had at Abū l-Haytham's, which included meat (*lahim*), bread (*khubz*), barley (*sha'ir*), ripening dates (*busr mudhannab*) and fresh water (*mā' adhb*), 'Do you not fear for us that this is part of the pleasures (*min al-na'im*) about which we will be questioned?' The Prophet answered, 'This only applies to the unbelievers (*innamā dhālika lil-kuffār*)' (al-Samarqandī 2014, vol. 3, p. 507). In another version, the Prophet also confirms this by reference to Qur'ān 34:17 *Do we ever recompense any but the unbeliever?* (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 81).

The second example is a negotiation of attitudes towards wealth and avarice, implied in the interpretations of *al-takāthur* as hoarding of wealth and of *al-na'im* as material comforts. The process of negotiation involved similar strategies: emphasising humility and expression of gratitude to God as the source of all wealth, stipulating conditions that render wealth acceptable through the suggestion of compensatory acts of charity and devotional practices, and restricting the injunction against *al-na'im* (in its different interpretations) to the unbelievers.

The emphasis on gratitude is implied in the Prophet's saying, related from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, 'Whatever small or great blessing (*ni'mah ṣaghīrah aw kathīrah*) God has bestowed (*an'ama*) on His servant, he should say for it, "Praise be to God!", although it is better that God the Sublime gives to him rather than He deprives him (*illā a'ṭāhu Allāh ta'ālā khayran mimma akhadha*)' (al-Samarqandī 2014, vol. 3, p. 507).

Conditions under which accumulation of wealth becomes a vice, with an implication that it is tolerated otherwise, are hinted at in the *ḥadīth* related by Ibn 'Abbās from the Prophet. In it, the Prophet defines *al-takāthur* as 'accumulation of wealth (*takāthur al-amwāl*) that one amasses from that which is not a proper source for it (*jama'ahā min ghayr ḥaqqihā*), refuses to pay its dues (*mana'a min ḥaqqihā*), and puts it tightly in the vessels (*shaddahā fī l-aw'iyah*)' (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 281; al-Qurṭubī 1994, vol. 19, p. 402).

Likewise, al-Zamakhsharī (n.d., vol. 4, p. 793) responding to the question about *al-na'im* that a human being will be questioned and reproved for (*al-na'im alladhi yus'alu*

'*anhu al-insān wa-yu'ātabu*), while everyone enjoys some comfort, distinguishes between the two kinds of *al-na'im*. He says that the questioning only applies to *al-na'im* when one is 'obsessed with having a full share of pleasures (*al-istifā' bi-l-ladhdhāt*) and lives only in order to eat delicious food (*li-ya'kul al-tayyib*), wear fine clothing (*yalbasa al-līn*), and spend time on amusement and entertainment (*al-lahw wa-l-ṭarab*), while he does not care about knowledge and good deeds (*lā ya'ba'u bi-l-'ilm wa-l-'amal*) and has no desire for them'. As for those who are enjoying God's blessings and favours (*tamatta'a bi-ni'mat Allah wa- arzāqihī*) which He did not create but for His servants, and which enable him to study and do good deeds (*taqawwā bi-hā 'alā dirāsāt al-'ilm wa-l-qiyām bi-l-'amal*), and for which he is being grateful (*wa-kāna nāhidān bi-l-shukr*)—he is exempt from being questioned about them on the Day of Judgement (*huwa min dhāka bi-ma'zil*). As proof, al-Zamakhsharī cites the Prophet's saying after he and his Companions have eaten dates and drunk water, 'Praise be to God who has provided us with food and drink and made us Muslims'.

Compensation for enjoying an affluent life by specific devotional practices is presumed in several traditions about the merits (*faḍā'il*) of reciting sūra *al-Takāthur*. Its recitation, some of them suggest, absolves the reciter from accountability for the blessings (*al-na'im*) he enjoyed. One tradition has the Prophet say, 'Whoever recites sūra *al-Takāthur*, God the Sublime will not hold him to account (*lam yuḥāsibhu*) for the blessings (*al-na'im*) that He bestowed (*an'ama*) on him in this world (*fi l-dār al-dunyā*) and will give him a reward (*min al-ajr*) as if he had recited [the entire] Qur'an' (al-Samarqandī 2014, vol. 4, p. 507). A similar tradition, related from the Prophet by Ubayy, specifies the reward as equal to that of reading a thousand verses (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 10, p. 276; al-Zamakhsharī n.d., vol. 4, p. 793). al-Ṭabrisī (1986, vol. 10, p. 810) adds two reports about the rewards for its recitation from Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, one related by him from the Prophet, who said that whoever recites this sūra instead of sleep (*'an nawm*) will be safe from the trials of the grave (*wuqiya fitnat al-qabr*).

Additionally, it has been suggested, as in the case of food, that questioning about *al-na'im* on the Day of Judgement will only apply to the unbelievers and will not concern Muslims. A disagreement about who will be questioned and the arguments supporting the two positions—that it is restricted to the unbelievers, or that it applies to both the unbelievers and Muslims—are discussed in our sources (al-Wāhidī 1994, pp. 549–50; al-Ṭabrisī 1986, vol. 10, p. 812; al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 81; Ibn al-Jawzī 1964, pp. 222–23; and especially Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 1998, pp. 258–60). The arguments for restricting it to the unbelievers include Muqātil's identification of the addressees of this verse as Meccan unbelievers who will be questioned about their ingratitude for God's favours; the literal meaning of the verse (*zāhir al-āyah*) that indicates that unbelievers were distracted by their boasting (*al-takāthur*) from being grateful to God; a saying from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī that no one will be questioned about *al-na'im* but the inhabitants of Hell (*ahl al-nār*); and the Prophet's response to Abū Bakr's concern of being questioned about *al-na'im* that this only applies to the unbelievers. Competing arguments refer to several traditions where the Prophet identifies *al-na'im* in the presence of Muslims, which, therefore, applies to Muslims, such as the banquet story and the *ḥadīth* of the two black things, among others, and a saying of Qatādah that on the Day of Judgement God will be questioning everyone who enjoyed God's blessing (*kull dhī ni'mah*).

Most commentators opted for the second position—that both the unbelievers and Muslims will be questioned about *al-na'im*. Such is the position of al-Māturīdī (2005, vol. 10, pp. 608–10), for whom this sūra is addressed not only to the unbelievers (*ahl al-kufr*) who on the Day of Reckoning will be questioned about their unbelief, but also to Muslims, whose questioning will remind them that their deeds have not reached the full share of gratitude for the blessing (*al-ni'mah*) that God bestowed upon them and that God is being kind to them (*tafaḍḍala 'alayhim*) and forgives them (*tajāwaza 'anhum*), because of His generosity (*bi-karamihī*) and kindness (*faḍlihī*). Al-Māwardī and al-Rāzī also opt for the view that the questioning applies to both: to the unbelievers as a reproach (*tawbīkh*) for their ingratitude (*tark al-shukr*) and to the believers for whom it will come as sign of honour (*tashrīf*) because of their gratitude and obedience (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 32, p. 81), or as good news that the

blessings (*al-na'im*) of this world will be combined for them with the blessings (*al-na'im*) in the Hereafter (al-Māwardī 2020, vol. 6, p. 332).

The third and last example—a rare attempt to negotiate the vice of pride, implied in the interpretation of *al-takāthur* as boasting of genealogy, wealth, or children—comes from the commentary of al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 32, pp. 75–76). As many other commentators, al-Rāzī too equates *al-takāthur* with *al-tafākhur* (boasting or taking pride in something), but he also raises the question of whether all pride is necessarily disapproved. Al-Rāzī says that *al-tafākhur* is a kind of happiness (*naw' min anwā' al-sa'adah*) which, in turn, can be of three types. One related to soul (*al-nafs*), such as knowledge or excellent moral qualities, is happiness of the first level. The second level of happiness is in relation to body (*al-badan*), such as health and beauty. The third relates to things external to the body, subdivided in turn into necessary things, such as wealth and status, and contingent, such as relatives and friends.

Happiness of the soul, al-Rāzī says, is desirable and praiseworthy, and many excellent people also seek bodily happiness to achieve the happiness of the soul. However, preoccupation with the third kind of happiness can prevent one from achieving the happiness of the soul and for this reason, according to al-Rāzī, God disapproved (*dhammahum*) of those who are being preoccupied with it in sūra *al-Takāthur*. This preoccupation can cover one's numbers, wealth, status, relatives, followers, and troops (*al-takāthur bi-l-'adad wa-l-māl wa-l-jāh wa-l-aqribā' wa-l-anṣār wa-l-jaysh*). A question then arises, he admits, about an apparent contradiction between the verse indicating that *al-takāthur* and *al-tafākhur* are disapproved of (*madhmūm*), and reason (*al-'aql*) that suggests that when they concern the true happiness they are not disapproved (*ghayr madhmūm*). The solution to this, al-Rāzī maintains, is to distinguish between various subjects of pride. He says that a human being is allowed (*yajūzu*) to take pride in his knowledge, obedience to God, and laudable moral qualities, if he thinks that others will follow his example. Therefore, *al-takāthur* in the verse does not apply to all pride, but only to taking pride (*al-tafākhur*) in things related to this world and its pleasures, because these can keep one away from obedience to God and from worshipping Him.

## 5. Conclusions

To conclude these observations about medieval Muslims' readings of moral injunctions in sūra *al-Takāthur*, it should be added that they were not restricted to abstract universal vices and virtues, such as pride, avarice, gourmandising, vanity, or ingratitude. Some commentators related these injunctions to specific historical phenomena, employing them to critique their contemporary societies, as we have seen, for example, in the association of *al-takāthur* with competition and pride in visiting the cemeteries and ostentatious memorials by Ibn Aṭīyyah and especially by Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī. Abū Ḥayyān's critique of the *ziyārah*-related customs in Mamluk Cairo was not surprising. By his time, *ziyārah* in Egypt had developed into an institution with groups of visitors being routinely led through the graves by the shaykhs of *ziyārah*, probably targeted by Abū Ḥayyān as '*ziyārah*-preoccupied Ṣūfīs', who were relating stories about the saints buried therein, and possibly receiving some compensation for this (Taylor 1999, pp. 62–63). Abū Ḥayyān's critique of the customs of the *ziyārah* was not unique either (Taylor 1999, pp. 168–210), but his attempt to present this critique in his *tafsīr* as a legitimate interpretation of *al-takāthur* is a much rarer phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

The overview of the different interpretations of *al-takāthur* and *al-na'im* in medieval commentaries on the Qur'ān, discussed in the second and third sections of this article, reveals the diversity of the moral vices that according to the commentators, sūra *al-Takāthur* was thought to be censuring. They range from personal and collective pride in genealogy, numerical strength of the clan, qualities and material possessions to avarice, gourmandising, self-indulgence, vanity, and ingratitude. The observations about the commentators' efforts to articulate, explain, justify, and negotiate these vices and to promote the corresponding virtues—as we have seen in the three cases of gourmandising, affluence, and pride—

demonstrate, through the example of sūra *al-Takāthur*, the complexity and dynamics in understanding the Qur'ānic text and its moral visions in medieval Muslim societies.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article follows [Arberry's \(1983\)](#) translation of the Qur'ān, with some modifications when required by context.
- <sup>2</sup> The report from Sa'īd ibn Hilāl that the Companions used to call al-Mughīrah ibn Shu'bah (d. between 48/668 and 51/671) '*al-hākum al-takāthur*' ([Ibn Abī Hātim 1999](#), vol. 10, p. 3459) suggests that it was a reproach for some concrete deed of his, but it is not specified and al-Mughīrah's biography mentions ample potential occasions for such a reproach.

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