

## Article

# The Cosmopolitan World of the Quran and Late Antique Humanism

Todd Lawson

Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 1C1, Canada; todd.lawson@utoronto.ca

**Abstract:** The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how two distinct but deeply related literary genres, which had become especially prominent in the 7th century Nile-to-Oxus region, have left an enduring impression on the form and contents of the Quran. By saying this, it is not intended to suggest that the Quran was “influenced” by this or that extraneous or extra-textual phenomenon. Rather, it is suggested that, along the lines of the Quran’s own theory of revelation, it speaks through Muḥammad, “the language of his people” (Q14:4). Stated another way, the Quran employs themes and structures from both epic and apocalypse that would have been familiar to its audience in order to reveal and make clear its most cherished sacred truths, among which are: the Oneness of God, the Oneness of Religion and the Oneness of Humanity. Epic and apocalypse, then, emerge as features of the cultural and imaginative language of the intended audience of the Quran, just as Arabic is its “linguistic” language.

**Keywords:** Quran; epic; apocalypse; late antiquity; cosmopolitanism; revelation; audience reception; humanism



**Citation:** Lawson, Todd. 2021. The Cosmopolitan World of the Quran and Late Antique Humanism. *Religions* 12: 562. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080562>

Academic Editor: Roberto Tottoli

Received: 24 May 2021

Accepted: 10 July 2021

Published: 21 July 2021

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Part 1

### *Prologue: The Literary World of the Quran*

To privilege the literary character of the Quran it is not intended, by any means, to detract from its undoubted status as divine revelation. Rather, the purpose should be considered part of a desire to understand more deeply what divine revelation means in the context of the Quran and its primary, though obviously not only, audience—Muslims. An indication of the way in which “literary” is to be taken throughout this essay is in the title of the late Professor Issa J. Boullata’s field-changing book: *Literary structures of religious meaning in the Qur’ān* (Boullata 2000, also see Suggested Reading<sup>1</sup>). Such a title may be thought at least partly inspired by the Quran itself: *We sent no messenger except [to teach] in the language of his [own] people, in order to make [things] clear to them* (Q 14:4). The methodological presupposition here is the same. It is assumed that the *language of his (own) people* includes much more than the merely linguistic elements of vocabulary, grammar, morphology and syntax, and encompasses those extra-linguistic factors that enliven any language and which supply, ultimately, those bases upon which any language acquires, generates and communicates meaning: that without which meaning is not really achieved no matter what linguistic “mechanism” (i.e., language, in the usual sense) is in play. This is, of course, a very vast field because there are many such factors. In this essay, we will restrict ourselves to three or four in order to demonstrate something significant about the Quran and its undoubted status as a book of divine revelation for Muslims, Islam and Islam’s message to humanity. This significance is closely related to what some have referred to as the “power” of the Quran: that which commands thrilled admiration for the sound and sense of the Quranic Arabic in virtually anyone who understands its “linguistic substrate”—Arabic (cf. Q 8:2). This article will suggest that beyond the beauty of the highly poetic and figurative Arabic, recited and heard in rhythmic cadences, in which the heard relation between vowels and consonants may be thought to provide an ever-changing yet

somehow constant, aesthetically compelling obligato-like “background music”, there is also an overall structure to the Quran which introduces what may best be thought of as literary innovation—a kind of literary modernism for its time and place in the context of a well-established and traditionally familiar field of literary expectations, even if the line between “literature” and “religion” is not always perfectly drawn. In short, here we are concerned as much, if not more, with the question “How does the Quran mean?”—to adapt Ciardi’s useful heuristic title (Ciardi 1959)—than with the usual one: “What does the Quran mean?”.

The heart of this 7th century literary and religious modernism that is the Quran has to do with the way in which the understanding of human and humanity seems to have expanded beyond its usual borders, the way in which well-known, contemporaneous ancient scriptures figure in the new work, reconfigured in the context of the new social reality, and, perhaps most importantly, the way in which two well-attested literary genres, epic and apocalypse, much esteemed by the otherwise vastly variegated potential Quranic audiences, are found in novel, combined form with the result that the existing “religious” (for lack of a better word) horizons of the readers and hearers are shifted and in some sense also expanded and enriched. By using the above title, then, two locations or worlds come to mind: (1) the literary world into which the Quran was born and (2) the world created by the literary structures employed and expectations assumed by the Quran. Here, we are mostly concerned with the second, but there will be some reference to the first.

To begin, I would ask the reader to banish, in the spirit of experimentation, all ideas or preconceptions about the *Sitz im Leben* of the Quran: the culture, history, anthropology and geography of the time and place in which it is universally recognized to have been composed. Thus, we are placing ourselves firmly in the practical criticism school, one which stays focused on the text itself as opposed to, say, trying to read and understand the text according to external factors, including authorial intention—factors which the schools of more abstract criticism value very highly. Such external factors may be symbolized by the life of the author in biography or chronicle. For the purposes of this discussion, we will ignore such factors. Rather, we will treat the Quran as a mysterious text, along the lines of the Dead Sea Scrolls, whose author is as unknowable as Allāh. It is a text discovered by accident, preserved in ancient scrolls perhaps in a cave, in two clay jars, one marked *tanzīl* and the other marked *muṣḥaf* (more about this below). Over the years, we have arrived at an understanding of the composition, but we have virtually no knowledge of the author or the audience. You see, in this experiment, Islam has not occurred, did not exist and did not make all those magnificent contributions to world culture and history for which we are now very grateful. There have been no Muslims or Muslim community. All we have is the text of what we call the Quran, in a language never before encountered, which we call Arabic, and an idea, because of the manner in which it was discovered, of its obviously high value to those who took the trouble to preserve it in writing and protect the text by hiding it in clay jars in a remote cave, let us say, in 7th century Arabia. Let us even say somewhere in the Hijaz—perhaps in a cave on Mt. Hira. However, the most important extra-textual knowledge here is that these “Quran scrolls” were deemed very precious, put in safekeeping until such a time as the people who preserved them, or their progeny, returned to reclaim them.

Thus, we have no vast libraries of Quranic sciences: lexicography, exegesis, grammar. Nor do we have those works of scholarship which we know to have been inspired or occasioned by the Quran such as theology, history, prose literature, tales of the prophets, poetry, magic, geography, and medicine. Nonetheless, we have somehow learned to understand the text as it is. Furthermore, we have discovered that the meaning and style of the “Dead Sea” Quran has much in common with other books from the ancient world, chiefly the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels—what some refer to as the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, the study thus far suggests that, in this connection, we might think of the Quran as The Newest Testament. (Cf. Wright 2018, esp. 141–45) However, there are other compositions as well. Most of these, excepting resonances with such things as the

Alexander Romance, are what have come to be known as holy books, so this is the category we are using in which to frame our study of the literary world of the Quran. Additionally, here we have two further possibilities: (1) the world reflected in the Quran, its themes, literary presuppositions, anthropology, artistry, science, history, etc.; (2) the way in which the Quran “literizes” or, not to be shocking, “fictionalizes” these topics, devices, concerns, and values. Here, again, we are opting for number 2, and we are using the idea of fiction not as the opposite of truth, but as something else altogether: the opposite of the opposite of truth.

The Bible, in both testamentary phases, we discover, is frequently referred to in this Quran. Additionally, we notice similarities along with dramatic differences. The chief difference is one of form. The Quran is made up of 114 sections which it calls *sūras* (Ar. pl. *suwar*) and each *sura* is made up of a number of verses (Arabic *āyāt*, sing. *āya*, “signs”). The number of verses for each *sura* can vary widely. The shortest *sura* is identified as Q 108 and bears the paradoxical name *al-kawthar*, which means “abundance” in Arabic. It has 3 verses and 12 words. We discover that the names of the *suras* are derived from the existence in them of particularly striking words. Thus, the longest *sura* in the Quran, Q 2, *al-baqara* “the cow,” has 285 verses and hundreds of words. Further, it is not about cows or farming or anything else the title might otherwise suggest. However, this distinctive and, therefore, memorable word occurs five times in *sura* 2, once in plural form and the remainder in singular. Indeed, these two scrolls agree in the way their *suras* are entitled. To be clear, the scrolls are identical except for one crucial factor—their *suras* are arranged in quite different order (again, more on this below). The respective headings for the *sura* in the two jars do not actually say: *sūrat al-baqara* “The chapter of the cow”. Rather, these headings are quite explicit: *al-sūrat al-latī dhukirat fihī al-baqara* “The chapter in which ‘the cow’ is mentioned”. Furthermore, the length of the Quranic verse is also not standardized. The shortest verse is a single word: Q 55:64 *Dark green in color—mudhāmmatān*. The longest verse is Q 2:282 with 256 words. Between these two extremes we find, as stated above, a wide variety of lengths of verses, a total of 6236, and their respective *suras*, of which the total is 114.<sup>2</sup> Another difference has to do with the voice of the Quran. It speaks in a wide variety of line length, end rhyme (from beginning to end), and subject-matter, and yet it is somehow quite consistent with regard to voice, even if there are different speakers. This is unlike the multiple voices in the Bible which have, to some extent, been unified and homogenized through, for example the majestic “King James” translation, but which remain clearly multiple as a function of the multiple authorship of those books. The voice of Q 108 is the same as the voice of Q 2. Voice here may in fact be thought of in some ways as a synonym for world or universe, and it stands for the unified, if variegated, literary world of the Quran.

The major similarities with the so-called “previous scriptures” have to do with what in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been called the “community rule”, and what we may refer to as Abrahamic ethical values, eschatology, expectation and apocalypse. This community rule has been propagated, what the Quran frequently calls “sent down, revealed” by a Quranic antitype of the Teacher of Righteousness, also of “Dead Sea Scrolls” fame. In the case of the Quran, this figure is frequently called a prophet (*nabī*) or messenger (*rasūl*). We also find many of the same *dramatis personae* in the Quran that we find in the earlier two testaments or covenants, many of which are designated as earlier prophets and messengers. Depending upon the method of counting, the Quran mentions 25 of these, including the most recent, a man named Muḥammad (mentioned four times in the text). Of these 25 names, there are a few that we have not encountered in other books, whether scripture or history, such as Muḥammad, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, and Shu‘ayb (Q 11: 52–63 and elsewhere, esp. Q 26).

In what follows, then, we will outline and describe two distinct features of our “Dead Sea” Quran, namely, epic and apocalypse. It will be seen that these two master genres are found everywhere in the text both distinctly and in their distinctive Quranic combination as a result of which the epic genre becomes “apocalyptized”, and apocalypse acquires a

high degree of narrative and descriptive clarity and telos through being “epicized”. This Quranic literary landscape, together with a third remaining feature, helps us understand the almost unprecedented appeal the non-Dead Sea or real Quran had in real time and place: that vast geographic and culturally variegated expanse stretching from Cadiz to the Hindu Kush in the 7–9th centuries CE. As such, the text, whether from Jar #1 or #2, reflects *and makes sense of* to a certain remarkable degree the teeming cosmopolitan culture of the time and place. Now, obviously, here we are relaxing our methodological stricture. The third element, referred to above, is the degree to which the idea of humanity or the human being becomes a center of focus, both in the Quranic epic and the Quranic apocalypse. (Cf. [Wright 2018](#)) The combination of epic, apocalypse and humanity, and their interrelated highly generative literary dynamics, chief amongst which is the powerful literary feature of typological figuration, will be the subject of what follows.

## 2. Part 2

### 2.1. Introduction: *The Modes of the Quran*

For the balance of this discussion, we will focus on these four aspects of the Quran which redound to the richness of its appeal and the poetic urgency of its meaning, whether aesthetic or religious (if these two can be separated in the case of the Quran) and the efficiency with which this meaning is communicated. These four broad headings are: apocalypse, epic, humanity and typological figuration. In my recent book, *Quran, epic and apocalypse*, I suggested that the Quran may be seen as a fugue of the two genres, epic and apocalypse. Though by using this analogy, I was more concerned in expressing the way in which the Quran seamlessly combines the two genres rather than with the way in which one genre may be thought now to be “chasing” one genre and vice versa. This feature of the fugue is also in play in the Quran. Yet, the main point of this, perhaps unlikely comparison with European baroque musical composition and performance (including the quite characteristic feature of improvisation), is to say something about how these two separate genres are blurred in the Quran. The blurring is especially interesting in that it may be seen to produce what might be thought of as generic role reversal. Such blurring and reversal of the two genres help us understand the “literary structures of religious meaning” in the much-celebrated frisson of the recited text, which conditions any subsequent “silent” reading of the Quran’s written text.

One of the unforeseen insights emerging from my above-mentioned 2017 book had to do with a perennial question in Quranic studies, whether “emic” or “etic”: why is the order of the “liturgical” Quran, that is the Quran in common use today—precisely the *muṣḥaf*—almost exactly the reverse of the chronological order in which, according to Muslim tradition, the Quran was orally revealed/composed and performed? As a result of contemplating the nature, role and function in the Quran of these two familiar genres (possibly the oldest in literary history), epic and apocalypse, it seemed unavoidable to conclude that those who had transformed the *tanzīl* (the scroll in Clay Jar # 1) into the *muṣḥaf* (the scroll in Clay Jar #2) sought to present the most recent communication from the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, and those otherwise unknown prophets mentioned above, and finally Muḥammad, as a distinctive, “Quranic” epic, even though the Arabic term for epic is not used as a title.

The *muṣḥaf* begins, after the invocation known as the Fātiḥa (Q 1) “The Overture”, the short sura of seven verses that opens today’s Quran, with, precisely the story of humankind and its dramatic, tragic, apocalyptic and enlightening experience with the divine through periodic revelation from God to a “teacher of righteousness”, who, in the Quran, is the prophet or the messenger. This epic begins in earnest, after another brief introduction which may be considered a Quran *praeparatio* (Q 2:1–28) where, in the Quran’s parlance, the story of the “sons of Adam” (humanity) begins with the appointing of Adam as God’s caliph, the encounter of Adam and Eve with the Devil (Iblis) and their expulsion from the Garden (Q 2: 29ff).

By contrast, the *tanzīl* (scroll in Jar #1) begins with the apocalyptic experience of an unnamed prophet's encounter with a supernatural being who communicates revelations, to humanity, here *al-insān*, at Q 96. It is interesting to observe that even in this early apocalyptic setting, with the otherworldly being commanding the anonymous prophet to read or recite, the epic élan of the Qur'an is expressed not in terms of the history and epic challenges to the sons of Adam, but in terms of the microcosmic epic of the growth of the individual human being, who begins their own private epic as a drop of sperm (Q 96:2). This highlights another frequent difference between epic and apocalyptic, their respective focus on the collective and the individual.

Epic (cf. Clay Jar #2 the *muṣḥaf*) is the genre of *telos*/purpose, identity, adventure, heroism, courage, intelligence or even craftiness (*furbismo*), rationality and, more often than not, triumph and social order because it makes some kind of sense of everyone's role in society as if that role had somehow been preordained. This is true of epics the world over. It is especially instrumental with regard to the existential-cum-literary business of identity. By contrast, apocalyptic, which characterizes the order of the *tanzīl* (Clay Jar #1), is the genre of change or instability, conflict, oppression, persecution, revolution, mystic awareness and apperception, imagination, alienation and, therefore, individual suffering and growth. In apocalypse, the human is frequently not an actor but an audience, whereas in epic the human is both. Apocalypse is characterized by ambiguity, the supra-rational, the gnomic, fear, violence, the perpetual war between good and evil, salvation, damnation and punishment and ultimately justice. Its sometimes violent and frequently translucent if not completely opaque—yet highly poetic—recital is concerned more with the moment and/or the immediate future than the long term (*kairos* rather than *telos*, though there is overlap). Epic is the genre of stability, peace and justice; apocalypse is the genre of change and conflict, discontent, oppression and despair, hope and struggle. Epic, much more than apocalypse, answers discursively and poetically all the large questions of life: where we came from, why we are born, why we live, why we suffer, why we die and what happens after, epic is the genre of human experience, and has been called a metonym for culture.

Humanity in the 7–9th century Nile-to-Oxus region was highly variegated, and the Quran, because of the vastness of the human variety in it and especially in its *muṣḥaf* arrangement, an arrangement in which narrative compulsion—"beginning, middle, end"—may be seen as a blueprint, palimpsest, X-ray, or fingerprint of the rich cosmopolitanism of Late Antiquity (Cameron 2017). As such, the Quran's human population, which is highly variegated as well, maps directly—if imperfectly (it is neither history nor census document)—onto the real historical situation of the Nile-to-Oxus 7–9th century time and place. Thus, the transformation from *tanzīl* to *muṣḥaf* signals a change in focus. The authorial decision to cast the canonical form of the revelation in the arrangement we call *muṣḥaf* has had a profound effect on the way the Quran is read and understood. Imagine a Bible that begins with the Book of Revelation and ends with Genesis.

## 2.2. Apocalypse

The argument for the Quran as apocalypse may seem unnecessary to many readers; however, it should be pointed out that it was important to make the explicit point in my earlier work because of the wide-ranging and rather robust refusal on the part of Quran scholars, apart from one or two exceptions, such as Casanova (1911) and Leemhuis (2001) to grasp the nettle and commit to an acknowledgement of the Quran's apocalyptic nature. While apocalypse is certainly not its only nature, it is one of several generic literary streams in the Quran, and, as it turns out, one of the more prominent and characteristic. Since identifying the first of the two elephants in the room, the scholarly world has grown more comfortable with the idea of an apocalyptic Quran. I will not take the time to demonstrate here such scholarly disinclination, or to muse on the reasons for such stubbornness, rather I will refer the interested reader to the appropriate discussion in my book (Lawson 2017, pp. 27–56).



That discussion is heavily influenced by the work of John J. Collins and his colleagues in the relatively recent academic “discipline” of apocalypse studies. A scan of this burgeoning library, which began to be consolidated in the 1980’s, reveals that despite the otherwise universality of its scope, studies of Islamic or even islamicate phenomena are conspicuous by their absence in the pertinent bibliographies of apocalyptic studies (Collins 1984). That the ideas of the Quran’s apocalyptic substrate were elaborated by me in conversation chiefly with this impressive body of literature may, therefore, expose it to the kinds of criticisms that work has attracted. Whatever those criticisms might be, however, it remains that Collins’ understanding and explication of something he calls “the apocalyptic imagination” is more than suggestive for the ongoing scholarship on apocalyptic as a more or less universal genre of literary expression no matter what language is involved. To quote a particularly salient and pertinent definition of apocalypse with immediate, and one might have thought obvious, relevance for Quranic studies:

Apocalypse, as the name of a literary genre, is derived from the Apocalypse of John, or Book of Revelation, in the New Testament. The word itself means ‘revelation,’ but it is reserved for revelations of a particular kind: mysterious revelations that are mediated or explained by a supernatural figure, usually an angel. They disclose a transcendent world of supernatural powers and an eschatological scenario, or view of the last things, that includes the judgment of the dead. Apocalyptic revelations are not exclusively concerned with the future. They may also be concerned with cosmology, including the geography of the heavens and the nether regions, as well as history, primordial times, and the end times. The judgment of the dead, however, is a constant and pivotal feature, since all the revelations have human destiny as their ultimate focus. (Collins 1987)

The relevance such a definition has for the Quran and Islam may be further affirmed by the recent founding of the *Journal of Apocalyptic Studies* . . . by Islamicists.

Due to space considerations, I will consider one or two of the major apocalyptic features identified in the literature and I reproduce here, for the convenience of the reader, a slightly modified version of the table from my book, entitled *Apocalyptic themes and motifs with Quranic analogues*. This table indicates how numerous other apocalyptic characteristics may be assumed to be represented to a greater or lesser degree in the Quran (Lawson 2017, p. 33). This table sets out in point form, the numerous coincidences of Collins’ and his colleague’s cumulative definition of apocalyptic by listing those features which are seen to condition the genre and the way in which these same features are seen to be present in the Quran. It is not suggested that the Quran duplicates perfectly all of the defining characteristics of Collins’ apocalypses in every instance; however, there is enough resonance and similarity to raise the question and offer a provisional suggestion regarding the apocalyptic character of the Quran as indicated in the following Table 1.

The most important factor is, of course, the first one in the above list: the theme of revelation. We content ourselves with an explication of this Quranic apocalyptic theme, which represents a merging of form and contents, and refer the reader to my book for a more complete consideration of the remaining elements in the above list (Lawson 2017, pp. xi–xxvi, 27–115).<sup>3</sup>

The Quran is really more about divine revelation than anything else. Its primary assertion is that revelation, the Greek word for which is ἀποκάλυψις (*apokálypsis*), the source of the English word apocalypse, has always taken place and that it, the Quran, is the most recent faithful and accurate record of such revelation. There are numerous words for this mode of communication distributed over thousands of verses, derived from a few Arabic, mainly triliteral, roots. In order of frequency, these roots, and the number of instances in which they occur, are: B Y N “to make clear” (523); ‘A Y Y / ‘A Y / ‘A W Y (Lane I, [130–131], etc.) “to indicate”: a back-formed theoretical root for *āya* / *āyāt* “sign(s)” (382); K T B “to write” (319); N Z L “to descend” (293)—this word represents the “sending down” of the Quran from the heavenly realm, it is the basis of the word written on Clay Jar #1: *tanzīl*; ‘A M R (of God) “to command, order, cause” (248); W Ḥ Y “to divinely inspire” (78);

B ‘A TH “to divinely raise up, reveal” (67); K SH F “to uncover” (20). All of these action words, or words indicating revelation as a noun, such as “sign”, are to be considered in tandem with both the source of the revelation, the most common designation for which is ALLĀH (and derivatives, 2851), together with all the hundreds of other mentions of divine attributes or the so-called “99 names” of God: the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Knowing, the Subtle, among literally dozens of others. All of these designations indicate revelation or apocalypse. Another such word, from Ḥ Q Q “to be true” (287), may be thought of, in the form *al-Ḥaqq*, one of the more lofty and abstract names of God, as the Absolutely Real or True and, as such, represents an even more transcendent aspect of the divine source of revelation. There are many other words throughout the Quran which sustain and lend harmony to the idea of apocalypse/revelation, e.g., Z H R (59), F T Ḥ (38), B D Y (31) and T L ‘A (19). Words for shine forth, glow and irradiate also connect with the Quranic apocalypse: N W R “light” (43), “fire” (145), “enlightened” (6), D W ‘A “to radiate, shine” (6), M J D “to be glorious” (6), J L W “to become manifest, be revealed” (5) and Z H R “to shine” (1).

**Table 1.** Apocalyptic themes and motifs with Quranic analogues.

APOCALYPSE	QURAN
revelation	<i>tanzil, kashf, bayan, haqq, aya</i>
truth	<i>al-haqq</i>
other-worldly revelator/intermediary	Gabriel
cosmogony	Quranic creation narrative
primordial events	Day of the Covenant, Q7:172 <i>et passim</i>
recollection of the past	stories of prophets & their communities
eschatological events & upheavals	<i>al-sa‘a, al-amr, al-waqi‘a, al-akhira</i>
persecution of the righteous	stories of the prophets
judgment/destruction of wicked/persecutors	divine punishment
judgment /destruction of the world	see above, eschatology
cosmic transformations	<i>khalq jadid</i>
resurrection	<i>passim</i>
other forms of afterlife: angels & demons	<i>al-janna, al-nar, barzakh, jinn, shayatin, mala’ika</i>
pseudonymity/anonymity	authorship of the Quran
ambiguity and multivocality	cf. the <i>tafsir</i> tradition
glory motif	Divine presence, <i>tajalli, sakina, al-haqq</i> , divine names, attributes, signs, the Word, the Book, the Light verse (Q24:35)
illocution	numerous <i>qul</i> passages & other imperatives, directives
aurality	oral composition and aural reception
cultural hybridism	loanwords, hybrid eschatology (Perso-semitic)
orchestration of authorial voices	variety of grammatical persons as actor, actant, narrator
literary forms and devices	<i>saj‘, mathal, tashbih, story, epic, apocalypse</i>
time and history periodized	previous epochs, <i>jahiliyya, islamiyya</i> , pre-creation
enantiodromia	<i>passim</i>
closure, the end/goal	<i>yawm al-din</i>

In addition to words for the source of revelation and the act and substance of revelation, there is also the range of individuals, the above-mentioned prophets and messengers, who function as intermediaries for and bearers of revelation, and then, of course their audience. One may consider here that this 7th century late antique composition succeeds in routinizing the otherwise exceptional event of apocalypse by claiming, as in Q 10:47: “every community has had a messenger.” This is so even if the Quran names only 25 or so such figures. To cheat a bit here and refer to the post-Quranic tradition, Muslim scholars eventually speculated that in order to account for the history of humanity recently rewritten by Muslim scholars such as aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923) there had to have been at least 124,000 such prophets and messengers to account for the highly variegated number of languages and cultures that had existed and still exist. Nothing is more emblematic of the cosmopolitan élan of the Quran than this number. Furthermore, these figures, according to the foundational Quranic literary and doctrinal device of typological figuration, were all as much apocalypticists as they were teachers of righteousness or law-givers.

These two elements, the idea of revelation and the vehicle (prophetic figure) of revelation, are so much in evidence—as both form and contents—in the literary “circuitry” of the Quran, so much a part of the text that it would be counterproductive to try and tabulate the frequency of their occurrence in this brief article.

In addition, to the process of revelation, there are numerous other apocalyptic “occasions” throughout the Quran, as indicated in the above table. As suggested, by especially Jar #1, *tanzīl*, the very earliest revelations abound with what I have elsewhere deemed “tropes of intensity” (Lawson 2017, pp. xxiv, xxvi, xxvii, 43, 49, 52, 78, 196 n. 65). It is here that we become apprised of the sun becoming wrapped in darkness (Q 81:1); the cleaving of the moon (Q 54:1–2), the darkening of the moon (Q 75:7–8), the falling of the stars (Q 81:2), the mountains transformed into tufts of wool (Q 101:5) or crumbled to dust (Q 7:143), murdered infants speaking from the grave demanding to know why they had been killed (Q 70:9), mountains ground into sand (Q 73:14), mountains blown away (Q 77:10), mountains moved away (Q 78:20, 81:3, 18:47), the boiling over of the seas (Q 81:6, 82:3); damning critiques of social injustice (Q 4:10; 2:220; 4:75, 4:98 and *passim*), falsely claiming to be oppressed (Q 4:97); ascensions to the realms of heaven (Q 17:1); warnings about impending justice and punishment for breaking God’s law (*passim*, esp. with the root Ṭ L M, 315x), frequent mentions of *al-sā‘a*, “the Hour,” (49), *al-yawm*, “the Day” (405) of reckoning, the *al-ākhirā* sequel of “hereafter” (220) and *al-qiyāma* “judgment/resurrection” (70), which is also frequently mentioned throughout the Quran, and, finally, references to power falling to those who had once been oppressed (Q 13:11).

All this, together with those virtually numberless instances in which guidance, salvation, deliverance from error, distinguishing truth from falsehood, reading the signs of God for the truth, leave no doubt that revelation is, in fact, one of the most important themes of the Quran: it is a work that is its own main character, a work that is about itself. Furthermore, the urgency of the revelations indicate that apocalyptic-cum-eschatological expectation may well have been focused on the near future rather than some quite later date. Thus, the Quran may be seen as a distinctive but unmistakable record and voice of apocalypse.

As a segue into the next section, it will be useful to remark upon the cosmic implications of the Quranic notion of Judgment and Salvation, Heaven and Hell, Good and Bad. As a result of the manner in which these themes and motives are woven into a single message, it becomes clear that what we mistake for “nature” is really a cosmic system for communicating the divine message. Nowhere is this more clear than in the much-quoted verse (Q 41:53):

Soon We will show them Our signs (*āyātina*) in the physical realm and in their own souls so that they may come to know the truth (*al-ḥaqq*).

The litany of such oppositions as the above-mentioned “Heaven ≠ Hell”, and many others as well, is ceaselessly heard throughout the Quran resulting in a text or composition whose coherence is significantly maintained through this interplay of dualities and oppositions



no matter which scroll we are reading (Lawson 2017, pp. 76–93). Thus, according to the Quran, apocalypse/revelation occurs in three different but profoundly related locations: (1) in the Quran itself whose “verses” are actually called “signs” (*āyāt*), (2) in the physical realm, literally the “horizons” (*āfāq*), and finally (3) in the souls of human beings (*anfus*, singular *nafs*). That reading the divinely revealed signs appearing in these three distinct but deeply interrelated realms is such a foundational human duty and characteristic, according to the Quran, suggests that our species could be just as easily designated *Homo lector* as *Homo sapiens*.

There are many passages which are deeply moving or touching, even to the objective and hard-bitten “pure” philologist who has stabilized an English version of our scrolls. One of these is the exquisite Light Verse (Q 24:35). This verse states, in unrivalled poetic diction and metaphor, that over all this revelatory/apocalyptic activity presides God, who is described in one of the most beautiful passages of any scripture or, for that matter, work of literature.

God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth.  
His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp.  
The lamp is in a glass.  
And this glass is itself like a glittering star.  
Kindled from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East nor of the West  
Whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it.  
Light upon Light!  
God guides to his light whom he will.  
Thus does God strike similitudes for men.  
While God has knowledge of everything.

(Arberry translation, slightly adapted)

From the scroll in Jar #1, then, we gain an idea of the power and beauty of divine revelation, that it is now occurring, and that it is part of the sunna or “practice” of God, and, therefore, has always occurred. We also understand that there is a great intensity pursuing the audience in the literary form of spectacular and even catastrophic “natural” events in line with the moral and spiritual state of the audience. In the next section, we gain some idea, through the contents of Jar #2, of how this same process has played out in history, how history began, what are the important events that punctuate humanity’s collective sojourn on earth and what may be expected in the future.

### 2.3. Epic

“(E)pic is hugely ambitious, undertaking to articulate the most essential aspects of a culture, from its origin stories to its ideals of social behavior, social structure, relationship to the natural world and to the supernatural. The scope of epic is matched by its attitude: as Aristotle noted, it dwells on the serious. (Even its meter, says Aristotle, is ‘most stately and weightiest . . .’ Poetics 1459, b34–5.) Epic, the ultimate metonymic art form from the perspective of its *pars pro toto* performance, is on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself.” (Martin 2005, p. 18)

In the epic, humanity itself is the center of attention, unlike those events in the oldest suras such as the falling of the stars or the splitting of the moon, or the nearness of “the Hour”. Note, also, these things remain as the divine word, but they now occupy, by comparison, a less prominent place in the textual landscape and grammar of the Quran. The Quran remains powerfully—not to say apocalyptically—eschatological. However, now the logic of such eschatology is more readable and trumps the less accessible logic of apocalypse. The new epic form marks out the experience as one of a community composed of individuals rather than an individual who may or may not be a member of a community.

For a working definition of epic, we rely on the current comparative scholarship from which these twelve principal elements are derived. (See Suggested Reading, note 1) We will treat each one of these briefly.

### 2.3.1. An Epic Is Frequently the First or Oldest Literary Work—Oral or Written—Of a Given Culture

The Quran is generally regarded as the first book in Arabic. It is certainly the book which more than any other has contributed to the consolidation of the identity of the “nation” of Muslims, whether Arab or not. Thus, after the *Fātiḥa* and a few lines of human-centered homiletics, Q 2:29 begins, seemingly, with the beginning of humanity in the story of Adam. One says seemingly because we do, in time, discover that the creation of Adam and Eve, the bowing of the angels to him, the refusal of Iblis to accept Adam’s superiority, this scenario (Q 2:29–38 and elsewhere) was not the first event of significance, according to the Quran.

### 2.3.2. An Epic Opens in Medias Res

For this event, we must wait until the seventh sura, where the real beginning in the Quran of both time, history and the awakening of consciousness is disclosed. Known as the day of the covenant (*yawm al-mīthāq*) in Islam, it is understood to have occurred in a spiritual realm before creation, before time and place existed. There, at verse 172, God summoned the souls of all future humans to his presence and asked them the defining question: “Am I not your Lord?”. To this question, the vast gathering of numberless souls responded “Indeed, to this we testify!”. Such an episode renders the story of Adam and Eve at Q 2:29ff a perfect example of an epic that begins *in medias res*: “in the midst of things”.

### 2.3.3. The Time and Place of the Text Is Vast, Covering Many Geographic Settings, Nations and/or Worlds

The Quran addresses a humanity that has existed since before time began, according to the mythic scenario of the Day of the Covenant above. It speaks of various worlds of God who is “the Lord of all worlds” (Q 1:2) and acknowledges a recurring covenant that has been instituted between God and every human and every human community that ever was. This vastness is symbolized in the prophetic history which the Quran teaches.

Narrative compulsion at the surface level of the Quranic literary vision begins on this Day of the Covenant. However, it is clear, from the ethos of the Quran, that the *Sitz im Leben* for the narrative is precisely the chaos of religions in the Late Antique, 7th century Nile-to-Oxus region where various communal identities based on Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, to name the most prominent, vie for cultural space. However, lest we get ahead of ourselves, let us list the other main constituents or elements of the epic form.

### 2.3.4. An Epic Usually Begins with an Invocation or Request for Inspiration/Guidance

In the case of the Quran, this would be the above-mentioned first sura, *al-Fātiḥa*, which means literally the opener or “overture”. It will be useful to quote a translation here to give a further idea of the nature of the epic character of the Quran.

- 1 In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate God.
- 2 Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Worlds,
- 3 The Merciful, the Compassionate,
- 4 Master of the Day of Reckoning.
- 5 You we serve; to You we turn for help.
- 6 Guide us on the straight path,
- 7 The path of those You have blessed, not of those with whom You are angry  
nor of those who go astray.

(Jones translation, slightly adapted)

It is pertinent to note that this text is perhaps the single most recited scripture on the planet because it is used on numberless occasions as a prayer or blessing in addition to its role in the five daily prayers of Muslims. It is also, interestingly enough, in the current context, deemed by the scholarly tradition to have been revealed twice, the first time as the “opener” of the apocalypse in Mecca, the second as the opening introduction—something of a *praepositio* (see next item) in Medina. Here, it is important to note the semantic range of the Arabic root for the word *fātiḥa*, F T Ḥ. It can mean “to open” or to “conquer” a territory, to open the mind or the heart or to open, as in disclose and unveil, a secret. Thus, this twice revealed distinctive brief sura functions simultaneously as an element of the apocalypse and the epic modes of the Quran.

### 2.3.5. An Epic Also Early on Introduces a Theme: This Is the Praepositio

In addition to the *Fātiḥa*, another introduction to the epic Quran may be seen as following immediately. The first few verses of sura 2, al-Baqara (the 91st or 87th sura to be revealed, according to the most common chronologies of revelation), lay out the general concerns of the epic Quran (2:1–29): the continuity of revelation—it has happened before, it is happening now; the importance of obedience to the revelation and its laws; the promise of reward for good and punishment for evil. The ensuing verses and suras, much concerned with the heroism of the prophets and messengers, may be thought to illustrate the truth of these opening verses.

### 2.3.6. An Epic Makes Pervasive and Fluent Use of Epithet

The Quran is rhetorically very rich, and epithet is among its most pervasive riches, setting another gauge of continuity. As in the Homeric “rosy fingers of dawn” or “the wine dark sea”, the Quran uses in abundance such epithets as “the life of this world below” (*ḥayāt al-dunyā*), signaling spiritual distance from God, or the “heavens and the earth” (*as-samawāt wa’l-ard*) as an epithet of totality.

### 2.3.7. Epic Similes and Figures Abound

As a sign of the Quran’s self-reflexivity, it even speaks about using similes and metaphors and acknowledges that such poetic devices are a part of its own *modus operandi*. Sura 2, in addition to introducing the epic story of humanity, granted in *medias res*, also expands on this use of *mathal* “simile”, as when the light is snatched away (Q 2:17) or when the gnat or whatever is above it is stated to be fair grist for the Quranic mill (Q 2:26). The prime example for the Quranic dependence upon metaphor and simile, we have already quoted above, the verse of light (Q 24:35). Such figures abound. A particularly characteristic Quranic employment of simile or metaphor may also be seen in the dozens of divine names throughout the text. These so-called “ninety-nine names” are a characteristic feature of the Quran; indeed, it could be stated that no other feature is more characteristic. On the basis of the firm Quranic teaching (Q 112 *et passim*), that God is utterly unknowable and unlike anything else, these names acquire a particular anagogic or metaphoric status. Their numbers are set somewhat arbitrarily at 99, but there are many more words than 99 that qualify as names or indicators of the divine (Böwering 2002). These names, along with the numerous epithets for the Quran itself found in the Text (Mir 2003), represent an interesting variation on the epic simile or metaphor, and they may also be thought to perform double duty as a feature of the next item—epic lists.

### 2.3.8. An Epic Contains Long Lists of Culturally Specific Realia/Artifacts/Products

The culturally specific “artifacts” here are chiefly the types of humans identified by the Quran, either by their religious communities or their moral health (see below Section 2.4 Humanity). We may consider a neologism such as “anthrotope” here, along the lines of Bakhtin’s chronotope, to help us consider this very distinctive Quranic feature of a “place of human variety and pluralism”. With regard to lists of material objects, there

has not been much work done on the material culture mentioned in the Quran and what has been done seems to have been restricted to the material culture of the Arabs of the peninsula. Since much of this material had “migrated” from points further north, east and in some cases south, and even west, it also reflects the culture from an epic angle. For long lists and itemizations, we do not find an equivalent to the lists of ships or arms in Homer, for example. In addition to the human types, and the various religious communities that may be thought part of such a list, there are also the numerous names and attributes of God, as mentioned in the previous section, which may be thought to fulfill, in some ways, this epic “requirement”.

### 2.3.9. The Epic Features Extended Examples of Verbal Eloquence and Artistry

The Quran is seen as both the first book and the epitome of eloquence in the Arabic language. It is, from one perspective, a single long speech by God through Muḥammad as mediated by the angel of revelation, identified later as Gabriel.

### 2.3.10. The Epic Demonstrates and Describes Divine Intervention in Human Affairs

This element really requires no explication or comment. The entire epic thrust of the Quran has to do with God’s intervention in history and human affairs. The Quran represents itself not only as being about such interventions, but actually *being* the latest intervention by God.

### 2.3.11. The Epic Features Heroes Who Embody and Personify the Values and Ethos of the Culture

These are those 25 or so Quranic and those 124,000 theoretical pre-Quranic prophets and messengers mentioned earlier. It is important to note, however, that such heroism is participated in, emulated, studied and embodied by the audience, whether collective or individual, whether as a mere reader who achieves and wins understanding, or as a “citizen” who participates in the venture of a just and peaceful society or community and accepts the moral and existential challenges of the Quran.

### 2.3.12. Epic Is Performed before an Audience

This feature also requires no comment. The revelations, according to tradition were composed during performance, thus, pointing to the artistic category of improvisation.

### 2.3.13. An Epic Describes a Vast Setting of Time and Place

The scale of time and place in the Quran *is* vast. The Quran’s “setting” or more accurately, the Quran’s chronotope, is epic in every way: it begins before the created beginning with that important and utterly cosmopolitan “day of the covenant” scene at Q 7:172 and carries on until “the end that has no end” with those apocalyptic visions of the Hour, Judgment and Resurrection.<sup>4</sup> In essence, each of these moments is another occasion for revelation, which, according to the Quran’s theory of prophecy and history, will never end:

And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea were ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted; for verily, God is almighty, wise (Q 31:27, Asad translation).

Furthermore, the places, communities, nations, races, languages that are acknowledged by the Quran represent a variety heretofore unencountered in the Nile-to-Oxus library of either epic or scripture. One may, in fact, consider the numerous identities in that extra-Quranic document, stated to have been written by Muḥammad, the remarkable Constitution of Medina, as something of a precursor, adumbration or possibly even reflection of the distinctive pluralism and cosmopolitanism of the Dār al-Islām of the Abbasid era and beyond.

## 2.4. Humanity

One of the most important distinguishing features of the Quran is its theme of humanity, both in the aggregate and as individual. There are a number of Arabic words at play here: *nās*, *insān*, *bashar*, *khalq*, followed by subdivisions or categories: *muslim*, *mu'min*, *muḥsin*, Christian, Jew, Sabian, *mushrik*, *mufsid*, *kāfir*, *jāhil*, and their social units: *qawm*, *qabīl*, *alwān*, *alsān*, amongst others. This third major component of our theory of Quranic epic and apocalypse has already been alluded to several times above. It seems beyond dispute that one of the chief concerns of the Quran, perhaps as important as revelation itself, is humanity, both in the collective and as individual. A brief catalogue of all the words used in the Quran to designate this “species” supports this assertion. The most frequent term, *al-nās*, (from N W S) occurs 241 times in the Quran with the meaning of humanity, man, men and the people. *Insān*, *unās* and *ins*, derived from A N S, refers 90 times to man/humankind/the human. Interestingly, it occurs five times in a verbal form, *ānasa*, meaning to perceive. *Bashar* is another word for human, sometimes thought to refer directly to the “lower nature.” It occurs 37 times as such. B SH R is a frequent Quranic root, occurring a total of 123 times. It is interesting that it occurs 83 times in the verbal and nominal forms: “to give good news,” a cognate to gospel. *Imru'* “man/person” x 11 and *imra'a* “woman/person” occurs 26 times. *Rajūl/rijāl*, from R J L, denotes man/men and strongly connotes manliness, standing one's ground, strength, triumph and achievement against odds. Additionally, it has been used frequently in literature to refer to particularly devout or heroic women. It occurs 57 times. *Khalq*, our last word, means “creation”, and is a synonym for humanity. It occurs a total of 261 times in the Quran, to stand for the creative activity of God and the result of this activity, frequently specified as the human (e.g., Q 39:6). Thus, there are numerous words in the Quran that are used to designate communities of humans: *qawm*, from Q W M, occurs 383 times meaning folk, people, community; *umma* from U M M, 64 times meaning nation, people, community, religion; the hapax *shu'ūb* from SH 'Ayn B meaning nations; *dīn* from D Y N, meaning religious/cultural/ethnic group, occurs 92 times. *Ahl* “(the) people/family” occurs 127 times, including dozes as the distinctive Quranic epithet “people of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*); *āl* and the related *ūlī*, meaning people, family, ancestors, and related usages, from 'A W L, occurs 170 times. Tribe, *'ashīra/ma'shar*, from 'Ayn SH R, occurs six times; *qabīl* twice as tribe(s) (from Q B L); *raḥṭ*, family, x3 (R H Ṭ); descendants *asbāt* x5 (from S B Ṭ); sons/children, e.g., of Israel or Adam (from B N Y) x160. “Group,” *uṣbah* (from 'Ṣ B) occurs 5 times; “groups,” *'izah* (from 'Ayn Z W) is a hapax; *farīq/firqah* (from F R Q) occurs 33 times; “group,” *nafar/naḥf* (from N F R) occurs three times; “Groups,” *thubāt* (from TH B Y) occurs once; “A company,” *thuḥallāh* (from TH L L) occurs 3 times; Parties: “Host, group, troop,” *fi'ah* (F ' Y) occurs 11 times; “Party, confederates” *ḥizb* (from Ḥ Z B) occurs 20 times; “Party/sect” *shī'ah* (SH Y 'Ayn) occurs 20 times; finally, “group, party,” *ṭā'ifah* (Ṭ W F) occurs 25 times.

In light of this extensive vocabulary, including particular words for particular types of human (male and female), such as *mu'min*/believer (x228), *muslim* (x41), *abd*/servant and serving (x275), *kāfir*/unbeliever and *kufr*/unbelief (x525), Christian (x15 as *Naṣārā/Naṣrāniyya*), Jew (x15 as *Yahūd*, *Yahūdī* and *Hūd*; x43 as *Banu Isrā'īl*), *mushrik*/polytheist (x168), the various and numerous uses (x90) of *ṣāḥib/aṣḥāb* “member(s) of this or that group, e.g., those in hell (*aṣḥāb al-nār*) and the attendant verbal forms which can only be performed by humans, it is curious that in the *Encyclopaedia of the Quran* there is no article for human/humanity or even the somewhat outdated term “mankind”. This lack becomes more glaring when we revisit the main theme of the Quran as epic: to account for the birth, growth, identity, triumphs and failures of humanity on a global scale.

## 2.5. Typological Figuration

Even in its *muṣḥaf* arrangement, we encounter problems and obstacles usually not met with in the average book. Among these, it has been remarked by both Muslim and general readerships, is the apparent violation, from time to time, of the immutable literary law of consistency, sequence and coherent arrangement. This feature is particularly glaring



in Quran translations and so it is frequently adduced as a symbol of the “irrationality” of the Quran and, by association, the prophet Muḥammad, Islam and Muslims. Such a conclusion is really an act of intellectual violence and should be seen as such. For those who take the trouble to appreciate the Arabic Quran, however, the charge of incoherence is not heard, even if there may be an expression of puzzlement with regard to the narrative or compositional flow of the text in this or that instance. What is almost universally heard is an expression of admiring amazement of how the Quran does indeed seem to fit together in an intricate and astonishing manner (Mir 1986). The Quran demands much from the reader, morally, intellectually, and existentially, particularly with regard to the question “how best to read?”. This is because the Arabic of the Quran performs the function of supplying its own unifying music to the text through its language: the entire Quran is in rhyme, the sounds of the Arabic consonants and vowels also provide a powerful unifying music as well as the instrument with which such music is performed. Thus, questions of continuity recede in urgency in the presence of the compelling soundscape of the Quran, which also entails a pervasive use of the language of opposition and duality, a feature that may be considered a part of the textual grammar of the Book. While this topic has been covered in detail elsewhere, it is important here to give some idea of exactly what this entails, as in this quotation:

Dualities pervade the Quran from the merely quotidian up ≠ down, north ≠ south, night ≠ day, hot ≠ cold, to the downright Wagnerian eschatological emblems of the beginning and the end, hell and heaven, including those anonymous and mysterious groups, the Party of God (*ḥizb Allah*), the Party of Satan (*ḥizb al-Shayṭān*), the People of the Right Hand, the People of the Left Hand and so on. It would become the task of exegesis to identify such groups as the *aṣḥāb al-yamīn/al-maymana*, *aṣḥāb al-mash'ama* and *al-sābiqūn*, and a third category identified by the Quran as those brought near (*al-muqarrabun*, Q 56:11 & 14:29; Night ≠ day; heaven ≠ earth; private ≠ public; hidden ≠ seen; moon ≠ stars; sun ≠ moon; fire ≠ water; air ≠ earth; male ≠ female; mountain ≠ plain; road ≠ wilderness; shade ≠ sun are frequently invoked features of the natural world found mentioned throughout the Quran. They appear to have something in common with similar pairs of opposites, near-opposites and other pairs of moral-religious values and qualities invoked throughout the Quran: guidance/salvation ≠ perdition; faith ≠ unbelief; good ≠ evil; obedience ≠ rebelliousness; lying ≠ truth-talking; violence ≠ peace; patience ≠ impatience; kindness ≠ brutality; frivolity ≠ seriousness; knowledge ≠ ignorance; civility ≠ barbarism. These in turn have something in common with the oppositions that designate the last things such as: heaven ≠ hell; reward ≠ punishment; delight ≠ suffering; peace ≠ torment. Finally, these oppositions and dualities resonate with those thought special because they designate names of God Himself: the Manifest ≠ the Hidden; the First ≠ the Last; the Merciful ≠ the Wrathful; the Rewarding ≠ the Punishing; the Angry ≠ the Clement. (Lawson 2017, p. 84)

From beginning to end, whether reading the scroll in Clay Jar #1 or the one in Clay Jar #2, the reader is struck by the frequent and repeated use of tropes of opposition and duality which seem to point to an extraordinary noetic event known to medieval theologians as the joining of opposites (*concidentia oppositorum*). As was observed, no matter where one begins reading in the Quran, one finds that one is always in the “right place,” at the very center of the message (Brown 1983, p. 166). Such an experience is no doubt enhanced by this frequent and quite characteristic Quranic literary structure, the technical term for which is enantiodromia: the interplay of opposites and dualities. (See above, Table 1) The Quran, then, represents a literary and readerly “performance” of the idea that God is a sphere whose center is everywhere. The center of the Quran occurs no matter where in the text one is reading, and the center, as mentioned earlier, is the event of divine revelation (Brown 1983), an event that escapes logical understanding in the same way that the uniting of opposites escapes logical understanding.

Typological figuration is understood in the context of this interplay of dualities and oppositions. The pervasiveness of enantiodromia, a few forms of which were given above, tells us that in the Quran we are constantly engaged in drawing analogies, comparing, looking at one thing in light of another. It is from such a thick atmosphere of binary intellection that the defining literary figure or device, typological figuration, emerges. Typological figuration has long been recognized for its importance in reading the Bible, particularly in the way the language of the New Testament relates “fulfils” and “makes sense” of the language of the Old Testament (Goppelt 1982). Typological figuration has only recently become of interest to Quranic studies. Through a masterful and imaginative reading of Quran 26, the Sura of the Poets, Michael Zwettler (1990) first drew attention to the distinctive manner in which the Quran defines prophethood, both that of historical figures and that of Muḥammad. Through comparison and contrast, Zwettler pointed out that all of the prophetic figures mentioned in the Quran acquire a distinct identity through being contrasted with the role of the poet. Typological figuration comes into play when Muḥammad is “silently” brought into the equation and discovered to fulfill all of the requirements for prophethood found in those mentioned in the sura. Such a powerful literary device is at work throughout the Quran. The flatness of the typological portrait allows the equation to be worked out on the level of the abstract, such as the good and the bad, the saved and the damned. As we have seen, such oppositions are very much a part of the Quran. In *The Quran, epic and apocalypse* (2017), I extended the application of Zwettler’s method to a study of the cloak of Joseph and his story in Sura 12, Yūsuf, the greatest of all stories (*aḥsan al-qasas*). The poetic and literary function of typological figuration, it was suggested there, ultimately comes to stand for spiritual knowledge or truth: in the Quran, all of the prophets and messengers are equal (Q 2:136), and the typological resonances that obtain between, say, the life, career and portrait of Moses, the messenger most often mentioned in the Quran, and the life, career and portrait of Muḥammad—who is by contrast mentioned only four times—are decisive and, according to the Quran, irrefutable. The same may be stated for the typological resonances between Joseph and Muḥammad. Thus, if a spiritual identity be established between these heroes of the Quran, the same may be stated to occur for the Quran’s villains. Additionally, most importantly perhaps, the same may be stated to occur when a spiritual kinship is, thus, established between the followers and the communities of either the heroes or the villains. Typological figuration, as much if not more, than duality and opposition, provides a stream of continuity to the Quran, no matter from which clay jar we are reading. However, more than this, it connects the historical process of revelation, extends it to all humanity and renews, authenticates and enlivens it every time the Quran is recited or read, as observed in this passage from Marshall Hodgson:

For the Qur’ān continued, as in Mecca and Medina, to be a monumental challenge. In its form, it continued, even after the ending of active revelation with Muḥammad’s life, to be an event, an act, rather than merely a statement of facts or of norms. It was never designed to be read for information or even for inspiration, but to be recited as an act of commitment in worship; nor did it become a mere sacred source of authority as the founding of Islam receded into time. It continued its active role among all who accepted Islam and took it seriously. What one did with the Qur’ān was not to peruse it but to worship by means of it; not to passively receive it but, in reciting it, to reaffirm it for oneself: the event of revelation was renewed every time one of the faithful, in the act of worship, relived the Qur’ānic affirmations (Hodgson 1974, 1:367).

While translated Qurans all fail equally in communicating this rare heavenly symphony of meaning, what some have referred to as the hymnic nature of the Quran (Sells 2000), it is possible, even in translation, to polish and cultivate an appreciation for the, certainly sometimes challenging, distinctive Quranic expressions of literary coherence and consistency, its unity of voice, purpose, narrative and religious meaning and po-

etic electricity. Much of this electricity is generated by the seamless fusion of epic and apocalypse.

### 3. Conclusions

At one, perhaps unnaturally prolonged, stage in the history of the study of the Quran, there seemed to be a general consensus that the Quran, because of its very uniqueness, represented a genre of literature for which it was the only example—something of a paradox. In stressing the epic and apocalyptic literary universe of the Quran, we are, of course, employing the tried-and-true logical tool of analogy. Perhaps it is essential here to make clear what we are not saying so as to avoid potentially grievous misunderstanding. For this, we must turn on the light and return to the world in which Islam did occur. The life of the Prophet, associate “author” of the Quran, is to some extent known, and Muslim communities have thrived since its composition (oral or otherwise) and the history of its existence and function as scripture is remarkably well known.

We are not saying that Muhammad and his Quran were directly or even indirectly influenced by this or that epic poet, poem or poetic tradition apart from the inevitable at least oblique influence from the vibrant, pre-Islamic Arabic poetic tradition. What did “influence” the form and contents of the Quran is what might be referred to as the literary, religious and aesthetic expectations of the intended audience. We are saying that the earliest audiences of the Quran, especially of the Quran in final *muṣḥaf* form, were audiences that had and continued to enjoy and even compose various examples of the epic genre: Homer, Hesiod, the Sira of Muhammad, Firdawsi’s Book of Kings, the echoes of Gilgamesh, the Alexander romance. It was a story culture. We know that the epic genre is practically universal. Additionally, each community, in Quranic fashion, may be thought to have been sent a prophet or rhapsode who also communicated to their community some understanding of who that community was.

Three Quranic verses, among many others, bespeaking such universality and cosmopolitanism are:

Each community has [had] a messenger. When their messenger comes, judgement is given among them in equity, and they are not wronged. (Q 10:47)

Those who are ungrateful say, ‘Why has no sign been sent down to him from his Lord?’ You are simply a warner; and for every people there is a guide. (Q 13:7)

We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of good tidings and a warner. There is no community, but a warner has passed away among them. (Q 35:24)

This is the purpose of epic, no matter what label is used to describe it. It provides the lexicon of self-identity and a mythography for the broader cultural code (Lawson 2017, p. 12). Recent studies in the broad discipline of comparative epic literature support such an understanding. The same may be stated for the genre of apocalypse: it is a universal genre forged in the nexus of oppression, deliverance, punishment of tyrants, liberation of the oppressed and justice delayed but dreamt of and enlightenment. In this connection, the words of Northrop Frye on typological figuration are most salient:

Typology points to future events that are often thought of as transcending time, so that they contain a vertical lift as well as a horizontal move forward. The metaphorical kernel of this is the experience of waking up from a dream, as when Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus speaks of history as a nightmare from which he is trying to awake. When we wake up from sleep, one world is simply abolished and replaced by another. This suggests a clue to the origin of typology: it is essentially a revolutionary form of thought and rhetoric. We have revolutionary thought whenever the feeling “life is a dream” becomes geared to an impulse to awaken from it. (Frye 2007, pp. 82–83)

The intensity of the experience of revelation depicted in the Quran is reflected in the intensity and frequently fantastic language, imagery and symbolism of apocalyptic

literature. At note 1, below, there is a Suggested Reading section indicating some of the most important recent scholarship on these two genres, a scholarship which seems to agree that these generic categories, however else they may be designated in this or that cultural setting, stand for something universal in human experience and the literature that reflects that experience. Unfortunately, the terms “epic” and “apocalypse” are open to criticism when applied to some of these other cultural settings. Chief among such criticism is that pertaining to using these terms to apply to the Islamic or Islamicate instance. A Saidian critique against the use of such “imperialist,” “colonialist,” or more scientifically “etic” terms, exposes a disservice to the culture because they are foreign terms. Never mind that Islamic scholarship itself has a long history of applying its own terminology in the study of cultural and historical phenomena produced in the lands and peoples it found itself in charge of. We recognize that these are possibly not the best words, but we use them *faut de mieux*, and we trust that much of the foregoing has demonstrated their usefulness throughout our discussion, one largely in the key of phenomenology. We mean here to focus on what may be broadly construed as the human reality and understand Islam to represent a distinctive form of being human.

The point of this laborious apologetic is to make very clear our desired purpose: to provide a basis for asserting the universality of Islam and its kerygmatic élan. Here, this kerygma, call, challenge, summons—the technical term for which in Islamic Arabic is *da‘wa*—would be to simultaneously uphold the validity of the various revealed scriptural “epics” that preceded the Quran (of which there had been theoretically, at least 124,000) and to demonstrate that due to the comparative specificity of each of those previous revelations, including limitations of “race,” ethnicity, language, and general cultural presuppositions, each previous epic was somehow incomplete, especially to the extent that it posited a “chosen” people. The Quran insists, that there is no such thing as a chosen people.

Such universality is a response to, and reflects, the social imperatives of late antique cosmopolitanism in what Hodgson called “Islamdom”. It is important to emphasize that the people of the Quran do not need this to be demonstrated. Such universalism is part of the soul and mind of Islam. Therefore, rather than use words such as *qaṣīda* (epic ode), *qaṣaṣ* (story), *sīra* (travail, journey, biography, epic), *ayyām* (“days” = challenges, sufferings and triumphs, specifically of the Arabs) with which to frame this discussion, the “foreign” term epic, and its companion apocalypse is used by way of emphasizing a perhaps under-appreciated religious principle of Islam: One God, One Humanity, One Religion.

To the extent that the Quran conforms to the various expectations of the epic genre, its audience felt the form and contents to be familiar, edifying and entertaining. Its truth was, therefore, that much more readily absorbed, engaged with, countenanced. The argument is perhaps subtle, but I think it is worth risking because if reasonable, then it gives us more insight into the remarkable devotion of Muslims to their holy book. The same may be stated for the apocalyptic form and contents of the Quran. We are not saying that Muḥammad in revealing the Quran was immediately stirred by numerous apocalypses (in various languages) abroad in his time and place to, therefore, produce yet another one in Arabic. This, it is thought, would be immediately obvious and not require clarification. Nevertheless, to be as clear and cautious as possible, what we are saying is: the time of Muḥammad and the composition of the Quran was as much a time of literary apocalypses as it was of the epics. These genres may be thought of as somehow accurately representing and corresponding to the form and contents of the “souls” of the inhabitants of the Nile-to-Oxus region of the 7th century CE. Stated another way, it would have been most surprising had a book such as the Quran arisen in this cultural milieu, attained such universal and widely distributed authority and esteem and not also been heavily characterized by the epic and apocalyptic genres.

Neither literature nor history exist uninterpreted. As soon as they are composed and as soon as they are read or conveyed, they are interpreted. Additionally, the point of trying to abstract our “Dead Sea” Quran from its usual sociological, religious, historical and

anthropological setting, is not the same as saying we have discovered an uninterpreted text. While there have been numerous studies of the Quran as literature over the last 2 or 3 decades (Zadeh 2015), none have sufficiently stressed the epic nature of the Quran or the apocalyptic nature of the Quran. The virtue in doing so accomplishes a number of things: (1) it says something true and irrefutable about the Quran; (2) it demonstrates how the Quran as literature functions. What some prefer to understand and experience as the divine power of the Text, others may just as easily refer to the astonishing literary and poetic virtuosity and power of the Text. It is interesting to note that neither response changes the actual text. Furthermore, by focusing on this power as literary, that is the system or dynamic by which the words, verses and suras of the Quran “hang together” in Northrop Frye’s words about the Bible, then the Quran, an undoubted monument of world literature, is more easily approached by those who are not only religiously devoted to it. It broadens the audience. The epic as a metonym for culture is, of course, a metonym for that which is human.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

### <sup>1</sup> Suggested Reading

The foregoing essay is based largely on my 2017 book, *The Quran, Epic and Apocalypse* (London, Oneworld). There, the basic ideas presented here are more fully elaborated. Below, I have listed a few other key books and articles for those interested in reading more widely in the topics of Quran as literature, Apocalyptic, Epic, Typological Figuration and Islam as a blueprint or reflection of Late Antique cosmopolitanism.

#### *Quran and Literature*

Cuypers, Michel (2009), *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur’an*. Miami: Convivium.

Boullata, Issa J., ed. (2000), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an*. Richmond, U.K.: Curzon.

Ernst, Carl W. (2011), *How to Read the Qur’an: A New Guide with Select Translations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Farrin, Raymond (2014), *Structure and Qur’anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam’s Holy Text*. First edition. Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press.

Hajjaji-Jarrah, Soraya M. (2000), “The Enchantment of Reading: Sound, Meaning, and Expression in *Sūrat al-‘Ādiyāt*”. In *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an*, edited by Issa J. Boullata, Richmond, U.K.: Curzon, 228–51.

Mir, Mustansir (1986), *Coherence in the Qur’an: A Study of Iṣḥāq’s Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Quran*. Indianapolis, Indiana: American Trust Publications.

Mir, Mustansir (1999), “Is the Qur’an a shapeless book?”. In *Renaissance*, 9(8), <http://www.monthly-renaissance.com/issue/content.aspx?id=684> (accessed on 4 July 2021).

Neuwirth, Angelika, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, eds. (2010), *The Qur’an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu*. Leiden: Brill.

Qadi, Wadad al- (2006), *The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur’an*. Edited by Ramzi Baalbaki. Beirut: American University of Beirut.

Reda, Nevin (2017), *The Al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur’an’s Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes*. Montreal Quebec & Kingston Ontario, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Sells, Michael (1999), *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press.

#### *Apocalyptic*

Collins, John Joseph (1984), *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. New York: Crossroad.

Gunkel, Hermann (2006), *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*. Translated by K. William Whitney Jr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Hanson, Paul D. (1979), *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*. Revised. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Leemhuis, Frederick (2001), “Apocalypse”. In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*. Vol. 1, Leiden: Brill, 111–14.

Murphy, Frederick James (1998), *Fallen Is Babylon: The Revelation to John*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International.

#### *Epic*

Beissinger, Margaret H., Jane Tylus, and Susanne L. Wofford, eds. (1999), *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of*



Community. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foley, John Miles, ed. (2005) *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Revard, S.V., and J.K. Newman (1993), "Epic. I. History (Revard) and II. Theory (Newman)". In *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Edited by A. Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 361–75.

#### Typological Figuration

Auerbach, Erich (1984), "Figura." In *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, translated by Ralph Manheim, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 11–78.

Goppelt, Leonhard (1982), *TYPOS: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*. Translated by Donald H. Madvig. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Lawson, Todd (2012), "Typological Figuration and the Meaning of 'Spiritual': The Qur'anic Story of Joseph", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132 (2), 221–44.

Walfish, Barry D. (2003), "Typology, Narrative, and History: Isaac Ben Joseph Ha-Kohen on the Book of Ruth". In *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering, 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 119–32.

Zwettler, Michael (1990), "Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of the Poets and the Qur'anic Foundations of Prophetic Authority". In *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, edited by James L. Kugel. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 75–119.

#### Art, Aesthetics and Material Culture

Cameron, Averil (2005), "Art and the Early Christian Imagination". *Eastern Christian Art*, 2, 1–8.

Greifenhagen, F.V. (2009), "The Qamīs in 'Sūrat Yūsuf': A Prolegomenon to the Material Culture of Garments in the Formative Islamic Period/عصر الاسلام في بداية المقدمة للثقافة المادية للملابس في سورة يوسف". *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 11: 72–92.

Gruber, Christiane J., ed. (2019). *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and across the World*. London: Gingko.

Rustomji, Nerina (2009), *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

#### History

Bauer, Thomas (2018), *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* [Why there was no Islamic Middle Ages: the legacy of Antiquity and the Orient]. München: C.H. Beck.

Cameron, Averil (2017), "Late Antique Apocalyptic: A Context for the Qur'an?". In *Apocalypticism and Eschatology in Late Antiquity Encounters in the Abrahamic Religions, 6th-8th Centuries*, edited by H. Amirav, E. Grypeou, and G.G. Stroumsa. Leuven: Peeters, 17:1–20.

Donner, Fred McGraw (2010), *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S. (1974), *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mauder, Christian (2020), "Review (in English) of Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein Islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe Der Antike Und Der Orient*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 2018". In *Al-Usur al-Wusta: The Journal of Middle East Medievalists*, 28, 465–470.

Stetkevych, Jaroslav (1996), *Muhammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.Qurananalysis.com/analysis/basic-statistics.php?lang=EN> (accessed on 4 July 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Obviously each of these comparisons as suggested in the above Table could be the subject of separate and in some cases quite extensive studies.

<sup>4</sup> Chronotope is a translation of a Russian technical term made prominent in literary theory by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, pp. 84–258). Literally, "chronotope" means the usually imaginative or fictional time and space continuum of a particular work. "Bakhtin has shown how literature can help us to appreciate the fact that, in the course of cultural history, transformations of time concepts and spatial representations reflect radical changes in cultural attitudes and lived experience." (Bemong Nele et al. 2010, p. iii).

## References

### Primary Sources

*al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, innumerable printings based on the 1924 Royal Egyptian Cairo edition.

*The Koran Interpreted*. Translated by Arthur J. Arberry. London: George Alan, Unwin, 1955.

*The Message of the Qurān*. Translated by Muhammad Asad. Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980.

*The Qur'ān*. Translated by Alan Jones. Oxford: The E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007.

Quran statistics. <https://www.qurananalysis.com/analysis/basic-statistics.php?lang=EN>

## Secondary Sources

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson, and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bemong Nele, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer, and Kristoffel Demoen, eds. 2010. *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*. Gent: Ginko Academia Press.
- Boullata, Issa J., ed. 2000. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Quran*. Richmond: Curzon, 2000.
- Böwering, Gerhard. 2002. God and His Attributes. In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Leiden: Brill, vol. 2, pp. 316–31.
- Brown, Norman O. 1983. The Apocalypse of Islam. *Social Text* 8: 155–71. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cameron, Averil. 2017. Late Antique Apocalyptic: A Context for the Qur'an? In *Apocalypticism and Eschatology in Late Antiquity Encounters in the Abrahamic Religions, 6th–8th Centuries*. Edited by Hagit Amirav, Emmanouela Grypeou and Guy Stroumsa. Leuven: Peeters, vol. 17, pp. 1–20.
- Casanova, Paul. 1911. *Mohammed at la fin du monde: Étude critique sur l'Islām primitif*. Paris: Paul Geuthner.
- Ciardi, John. 1959. *How Does a Poem Mean?* Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
- Collins, John J. 1984. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. New York: Crossroad.
- Collins, John J. 1987. Apocalypse: An Overview. *Encyclopedia of Religion* 1: 409–14.
- Frye, Northrop. 2007. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Toronto: Penguin Canada.
- Goppelt, Leonhard. 1982. *TYPOS: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*. Translated by Donald H. Madvig. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Hodgson, Marshall G. S. 1974. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, vol. 3.
- Lawson, Todd. 2017. *The Quran, Epic and Apocalypse*. London: Oneworld Academic.
- Leemhuis, Fred. 2001. Apocalypse. *EQ* 1: 111–14.
- Martin, Richard P. 2005. Epic as Genre. In *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Edited by John Miles Foley. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 9–19.
- Mir, Mustansir. 1986. *Coherence in the Quran: A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Quran*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications.
- Mir, Mustansir. 2003. Names of the Quran. In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*. Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, vol. 3, pp. 505–15.
- Sells, Michael. 2000. A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Sūras of the Qur'ān: Spirit, Gender, and Aural Intertextuality. In *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*. Edited by Issa J. Boullata. Richmond: Curzon, pp. 3–25.
- Wright, Peter Matthews. 2018. Islam: The Khalifa Ideal. In *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, 7th ed. Edited by Leslie Stevenson, David L. Haberman, Peter Matthews Wright and Charlotte Witt. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 138–55.
- Zadeh, Travis. 2015. Quranic Studies and the Literary Turn. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135: 329–42. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zwettler, Michael. 1990. Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of the Poets and the Qur'ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority. In *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*. Edited by James L. Kugel. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 75–119.