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Coherent Chaos and Chaotic Cosmos: The Qur'ān and the Symmetry of Truth

“Divine grace comes to the help of a man menaced by earthly confusion and Ruin – this is the framework of the vision.”¹

“Symmetry, in any narrative, always means that historical content is being subordinated to mythical demands of design and form.”²

The somewhat playful title of this article alludes first to the long tradition of seeing the Qur'ān, at least upon first encounter, as a disordered 'chaotic' collection of intermittent, random or casual pericopes, which have been put in “some kind” of order by the early generations of redactors and editors as a scripture for the Islamic religion and Muslims. Research over the past few years, however, has clearly demonstrated that the present form of the Qur'ān represents a number of interconnected 'logics' of structure, content, performance, imagery, textual grammar, vocabulary and poetics.³ Thus, while from the 'outside' the Qur'ān appears to lack those essential features of 'the book', namely a beginning, middle and end, recent scholarship has remarked about and elucidated the many ways, some more subtle than others, in which the Qur'ān

¹ Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” trans. Ralph Manheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* 9 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 72.

² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 43.

³ Of this recent scholarship the most engaging is that of Angelika Neuwirth, Navid Kermani, Mustansir Mir, and Mathias Zahniser in addition to the seminal collection of studies edited by Issa Boullata, *Literary Structures of Religious Meanings in the Qur'ān*. (Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon, 2000), to which each of the above has contributed. See also the work of Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Daniel Madigan, Neal Robinson. My own “Duality, Opposition and Typology in the Qur'ān: The Apocalyptic Substrate,” *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies*, 10.2 (2008): 23-49 is a more recent contribution to the overall discussion.

reveals its textual secret of unity and consistency.⁴ True, the Qur'ān is not like other books, but despite this, in reading the Qur'ān one is never in doubt about its “centre of narrative gravity”.⁵

The second half of the title of this paper refers to the *Sitz im Leben* of the Qur'ānic revelation, the conditions of life, the social matrix, the notion, or its absence, of history and the general malaise we are told by sources that seemed to permeate daily life, at least in some quarters: meaninglessness, despair, anarchy and nihilism as these were felt and expressed in the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of the rise of Islām, a mood and ethos frequently denoted by the Arabic word *jahl*, ignorance, barbarity, injustice (about which more below). However chaotic and brutal this pre-Islamic period was, the Islamic ethos is confident that it was part of a larger scheme, a higher and broader inscrutable sense of order and that without it Islām as we know it would not have distinguished itself. The juxtaposition of these two epithets is intended to evoke the creative tension that may be seen to have been resolved, or at least addressed, in the Qur'ān and its later interpretation. Here, we are concerned only with the Qur'ān.

However chaos is defined or however it functions, there is no getting away from the fact that one of its main tasks is to affirm and support the terribly human experience of (and, if you like, addiction to), symmetry.⁶ It is, moreover, clearly no accident, and less an oversight, that not only is there no entry for chaos in the remarkable *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, the word itself seems not to occur more than once anywhere in its nearly 4,000 pages.⁷ While in the Qur'ān and Islām there are a number of “chaoses” (apparently there is no real plural) acknowledged, whether obliquely, by inference, allusion or metaphor, and as such presumed, the familiar one of a pre-creational chaos of emptiness and/or uncontrolled water as the starting point of a cosmogonic process is virtually absent (see a possible exception below). The pioneering study of this chaotic water we owe, of course, to the illustrious Göttingen alumnus, Hermann Gunkel.⁸ But water, in the Qur'ān at least, is always firmly connected to the ultimately rational (if

⁴ See, for example, Nevin Reda El-Tahry. “Coherence in the Qur'ān, A Literary Study of *Sūrat al-Baqara*,” University of Toronto, 2010 (unpublished PhD dissertation); in addition to the new insights it offers on the dynamics of inclusio, keywords, *iqtiṣāṣ* and intertextuality in the Qur'ān, it also provides a very useful overview of the earlier scholarship referred to above.

⁵ This phrase is borrowed from Daniel C. Dennett. “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” in: F. Kessel, P. Cole and D. Johnson (eds.) *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*. (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992), 103-114.

⁶ Apparently humans are not the only ones with this ‘problem’. Bees, for example, are said to be guided to the flower neither by its scent nor its color but rather by its symmetry.

⁷ Jane McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 6 vols. (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006). (Hereafter EQ) Search for ‘chaos’ performed on the electronic version through the University of Toronto interface, September 7, 2009. Nor does the word occur as a translation of an Arabic original in the very useful reference tool, Hanna Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'ān* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1983). There are numerous non-Qur'ānic words in modern standard Arabic that are used for some aspect of chaos: *fawḍā* (disorder, tohubobu); *habā'* (formless dust); *harjala* (confusion, muddle); *hayūlā* (primordial matter); *iḍṭirāb* (disarray, commotion); *tashwīsh* (confusion); *ikhṭilāṭ* (mixture, hodgepodge); *khawā'* (emptiness, confusion of elements before creation).

⁸ Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Ein religionsgeschichte Untersuchung über Gen. 1 und Ap. Jon 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895). Translated by K. William Whitney Jr. as *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis and Revelation 12* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.).

currently inscrutable and mysterious) will of God. Even when there is an apparent irrational and violent or chaotic deluge, it is clear that the water is under the ultimate control of God, and is a rational instrument of God's will. Thus, it may be used to mirror or dispense divine Mercy and Wrath⁹, and it may even represent an apocalyptic cataclysm¹⁰, but it does not stand for the nothingness or void which is at a core meaning of chaos and which may be, in other traditions, coeternal or coeval with God.¹¹

A number of vestigial references to primordial chaos may be read in a series of Qur'ānic words and verses. For example, it is possible that *al-ṭāmmat al-kubrā* in Qur'ān 79:34 usually understood as an eschatological eventuality, may indeed reflect, at least in its etymology, the great dragon *ti'amat* and thus an interesting cosmogonic – and also apocalyptic reversal: chaos comes at the end of creation as paradoxical affirmation of the truth of Islām. Note, in this connection, such words as – *al-dukhān* 'the great smoke' in Qur'ān 41:11 and 44:10, the crumbling of mountains (Qur'ān 101:5), the splitting of the moon (Qur'ān 54:1) and so on. The exegetes have confidently placed these emblems of terrestrial chaos and disorder at the end of time.¹² One notable exception where primordial disintegration plays an important role may be in Qur'ān 21:30:

“Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?”

Such a verse could, in fact be read to support the view that creation is precisely not tinged by disorder of any kind. The original state was unitary. And, such a view would be very much in line with the cardinal Islamic doctrine of *tawḥīd*, the commitment to the oneness of God, as distinct and opposed to *shirk* or polytheism. What splitting or apparent disorder one might see is actually the result of God's creative will, a will that is presented as being pre-eminently orderly, reasonable and harmonious.

⁹ Todd Lawson, “Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in Islam: Their Reflection in the Qur'ān and Quranic Images of Water,” in *Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in the World of Antiquity*, eds. Reinhard G. Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 248-67.

¹⁰ As in Q. 79:34: “When comes the most great overwhelming” / *fa'idhā jā'ati 't- ṭāmmatu'l-kubrā*. An interesting exception may be read in the famous Ḥadīth of the Cloud, *al-'amā'*. This is an extra Qur'ānic creation myth particularly dear to the Islamic mystical tradition preserved in both the *Sunan* and the *Musnad*. See, for example, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), *al-Musnad*, (Egypt: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1949), 4: 11. For a detailed discussion of this important *ḥadīth* see Stephen Lambden, “An Early Poem of Mīrzā Ḥusayn 'Alī Bahā'u'llāh: The Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing (*Rashḥ-i 'Amā'*),” *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (Sept. 1984): 4-114. In it the prophet Muḥammad is asked “Where was God before he created the heavens and the earth?” Muḥammad responded: “He was in a cloud (*al-'amā'*) above which there was no air and below which was no air.” Toshihiko Izutsu, in the context of his study of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) translates *al-'amā'* as “abysmal Darkness”, see his *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 116. Ibn Masarra (d. 931) indeed had already placed it as the first of ten sub-lunar principles from which creation proceeds and where it seems to correspond quite neatly to 'chaos'. R. Arnaldez, “Ibn Masarra,” *EP*. This could be a topic for the further study of extra- or post- Qur'ānic notions of chaos.

¹¹ N. J. Girardot, “Chaos,” *ER*².

¹² I am pleased to express my thanks to Professor Emerita Wadād al-Qāḍī for suggesting the significance of this for the present discussion (personal communication, September, 2009).

The significant primordial event in the Qur'ān is referred to in the literature as the Day of the Covenant, *yawm al-mīthāq*. Because of the distinctive events described in Qur'ān 7:172-4, it is also universally known as the Day of *a-last*: the day of “Am I not [your Lord?]”. The Qur'ān reads as follows:

“[Prophet], remember when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I not your Lord? (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum*)’ and they replied, ‘Yes, we bear witness (*balā' shahidnā*).’ So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘We were not aware of this,’ [173] or, ‘It was our forefathers who, before us, ascribed partners to God, and we are only the descendants who came after them: will you destroy us because of falsehoods they invented?’ [174] In this way We explain the messages, so that they may turn [to the right path].”

This scenario is universally understood as having transpired prior to actual creation and, in fact, represents “the beginning” in the great universal histories, such as that of al-Ṭabarī, produced during the hey-day of Abbasid power. Long recognized as having important influence in the realm of purely religious, theological and spiritual thought,¹³ recent research indicates that this Qur'ānic vignette reflects something salient and irreducible about the Islamic view of the world and its place in its history.¹⁴ There is obviously no space here to pursue this topic further at this time. We mention it as the only pre-creational scenario in the Qur'ān and one that would seem to reflect and emphasize certain key features of the Islamic religion, especially as they might pertain to the question of chaos, and its conceptual twin, order. Indeed, the primordial, “precreational” Day of the Covenant radiates order, meaning, justice and, indeed, harmony. The idea that all future souls are somehow present in Adam is familiar from Augustine.¹⁵ God's act of creation, as we are informed by the Qur'ān, seems to be a species of *creatio ex nihilo* although some have argued persuasively that however striking the frequent and characteristic Qur'ānic phrase may be (see below), it cannot be demonstrated, on the evidence that the Qur'ān therefore holds that God “was existing with absolutely nothing else.”¹⁶ This mode of creation is nonetheless clearly and powerfully expressed in nine separate contexts throughout the Qur'ān with some variation on the basic idea: When God wishes to create something he merely says to it

¹³ The standard, classical treatment of this last category is Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: the Quranic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl At-Tustari (d. 283/896)* (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 1980).

¹⁴ For a groundbreaking discussion of this important ‘mytheme’ of Islamic thought, see the recent monograph by Wadād al-Qāḍī, [Wadad Kadi], *The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur'ān*, American University of Beirut: The Margaret Weyerhaeuser Jewett Chair of Arabic Occasional Papers (2006), edited by Ramzi Baalbaki, Beirut: American University of Beirut, [2007]. See also the pertinent discussion in Todd Lawson, “Seeing Double: the Covenant and the Tablet of Ahmad,” in *Bahai Studies 1: The Bahai Faith and the World Religions*, ed. M. Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 2003), 39-87.

¹⁵ On this see Marjorie Suchocki, “The Symbolic Structure of Augustines Confessions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 3 (1982): 365-378.

¹⁶ Peterson quoting Averroës, “Creation,” EQ, 475-6.

“Be”, and it is. A representative example is the one that occurs earliest in the *muṣḥaf*, the Qur’ān text¹⁷:

“He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when He decrees something, He says only, ‘Be,’ and it is (*kun fa-yakūnu*)” (Qur’ān 2:117).¹⁸

This is possibly akin to the creation described in Genesis, where the forms of life are spoken into existence.¹⁹ Such ensures that whatever chaos and void might have existed prior to creation as such, it could not have been coeval with God. Thus the Qur’ān and Christian understanding of the Hebrew Bible would seem to share the same basic point of view. Again, the notion of order emerging from primordial chaos is not present. The analogue of this may be thought, as suggested above, the apocalyptic chaos described and indicated numerous times throughout the Qur’ān. Here “smoke” or “deluge” or all images of uncontrollable nature, are organized in an eloquent and frightening symmetrical scenario of the coming Hour (*al-sā’a*) or Event (*al-wāqī’a*). As disturbing and cataclysmic as these obviously are, the Qur’ān never hesitates about them being the result of God’s justice and will. So, they are controlled chaos, or paradoxical chaos. We frequently find this notion attested to and expressed in some of the more powerful, shorter Qur’ānic suras, such as the Chapter of the Chargers (Q.100, *Sūrat al-‘ādiyāt*) or the Chapter of the Clatterer (Q.101, *Sūrat al-qārī’a*), to name only two. In these instances the powerful apocalyptic energies of destruction and confusion are in some sense simultaneously tamed and intensified by the compelling verbal artistry of the actual Arabic.²⁰

There is one more interesting example, or possible example, of a kind of chaos. The famous Light Verse, Qur’ān 24:35 has long been esteemed as one of the more beautiful and compelling passages in the Qur’ān. Indeed, it has recently been compared with the *Paradiso* vision of Dante.²¹ But here in the Qur’ān the lack of symmetry leaves us always poised on the edge of a kind of chaos. The verse is as follows:

“God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it— light upon

¹⁷ This technical term designates the current, post-Muḥammadan form, order and arrangement of the text as it is found in all manuscripts and editions in the Muslim world. It is also known as the ‘Uthmānic codex. The word *muṣḥaf* is used to distinguish this ‘edition’ of the text from the actual Qur’ān, the aural Word of God, whose chronological revelation almost perfectly reverses the order of the text in printed versions.

¹⁸ Other Qur’anic verse which repeat some version of this formula are: 3:47; 3:59; 6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 25:7; 36:82; 40:68.

¹⁹ On this phenomenon, see the interesting discussion by Frye, *The Great Code*, 104-116. The asexual creativity of God (of a type found also in the Qur’ān) is, accordingly, a critique of nature cosmogonies and ontologies.

²⁰ Soraya Hajjaji-Jarrah, “The Enchantment of Reading: Sound, Meaning, and Expression in *Surat al-‘ādiyāt*,” in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’ān*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon, 2000), 228-51.

²¹ Samar Attar, “An Islamic Paradiso in a Medieval Christian Poem? Dante’s *Divine Comedy* Revisited”, in *Roads to Paradise*, eds. S. Günther and T. Lawson (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

light—God guides whoever He will to his Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything.” *Sūrat al-nūr* (Light) 24:35

The image of undifferentiated, perhaps blinding light presents us with the interesting paradox or irony that the first principle of order and knowledge is a powerful symbol for the unknowableness and inaccessibility of God, in line with other similarly apophatic pronouncements (e.g. Qur’ān 112). The beauty of this divine ‘chaos of light’ is almost immediately counterbalanced by a true image of ignorance, disbelief and confusion. Indeed, the uncontrollable effulgence of the divine light acquires an immediate intensification of meaning by the comparison with darkness (and vice versa):

“But the deeds of those who disbelieve are like a mirage in a desert, the thirsty person thinks there will be water but, when he gets there, he finds only God, who pays him his account in full—God is swift in reckoning. Or like shadows in a deep sea covered by wave upon wave, with clouds above—layer upon layer of darkness—if he holds out his hand, he is scarcely able to see it. The one to whom God gives no light has no light at all.” *Sūrat al-nūr* (Light) 24:39-40

If we wish to find real disorder and chaos in the Qur’ān, we must turn, then, to a different realm, one that is under the immediate control of not God, but men. A few Qur’ānic terms explicitly denote social disorder, disruption or even cataclysm. For example, *fitna*, a word that occurs 30 times in this nominal form, strongly connotes disorder on a social scale, its root meaning is “test” or “temptation”. It is frequently translated as “civil war” and is used to refer to the great, apparently irreparable breach in the unity of the Muslim community that issued in what we now refer to as Sunnī and Shī‘ī Islām. Here, the understanding is that there was an inability to withstand the temptation for which the unity of the Muslim community was sacrificed.²² The word in the plural (*fitan*) refers to those later “intramural” skirmishes, struggles and battles in which the idea of religious authority was at stake and derives special meaning to the degree that it engages with the apocalyptic *topos* of the Hour (*al-sā‘a*) so frequently mentioned in the Qur’ān.²³ Another pair of terms, *tafāwut* (fault, disharmony) and *fuṭūr* (flaws, fissures) occurs in one of dozens of verses espousing a distinctive Islamic teleological argument as heard in Qur’ān 67:2-5:

“He is the Mighty, the Forgiving; [3] who created the seven heavens, one above the other. You will not see any flaw (*tafāwut*) in what the Lord of Mercy creates. Look again! Can you see any flaw (*fuṭūr*)? [4] Look again! And again! Your sight will turn back to you, weak and defeated.”²⁴

Nonetheless, the dialectic of such oppositions and dualities as ‘chaos and order’ – even if this particular pair is not mentioned in the sacred text - is a very strong subtheme throughout Islamic literature beginning with the Qur’ān. Here we will touch on how this dialectic functions in Qur’ānic discourse by focusing on three different categories: scripture, society and history. The various and multiple

²² A good general but brief discussion is L. Gardet, “*Fitna*,” EI².

²³ E.g. Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād Khuzā‘ī (d. 843 CE), *Kitāb al-fitān*, studied at length in David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002).

²⁴ See also a similar meaning in the Arabic plural *furūj* at Qur’ān 50:6.

interconnected symmetries of the Qur'ān may be thought of as representing two banks of a river through which the central epic theme of Qur'ānic sacred history (which is the only kind) flows. Such symmetry is present, either explicitly or implicitly, in every verse — of which there are just over 6,000. For convenience, an excerpt from my recent study of this feature of the Qur'ān is quoted here to demonstrate how the central Islamic notion of 'affirming oneness' – *tawhīd*, is implicated and indicated in the constant interplay of duality and opposition in the Qur'ān.²⁵

[Qur'ānic] duality further enhances and emphasises the message of oneness that is the focus and task of *tawhīd*. This, in itself, is another example of duality and opposition. Such opposition, and the even more important automatic tension pointing to its resolution, is a key element in the magical hold the Qur'ān has upon those who experience it. Furthermore, this topos or figure – this *enantiodromia* – is distributed, or perhaps more accurately, circulates throughout the Qur'ān so that it figures in narratives, prayers and laws; it covers the spectrum from abstraction to the concrete, from divine attributes to elements of the natural world. It is an element of the Qur'ān's 'text grammar'²⁶ and it describes a spectrum of relative intensities, from the more or less 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 Allāh*), the Party of Satan (*ḥizb al-shayṭān*), the People of the Right Hand, the People of the Left Hand (*aṣḥāb al-yamīn/al-maymana*, *aṣḥāb al-mash'ama*; cf. also *al-sābiqūn*, a third category identified by the Qur'ān as those brought near (*al-muqarrabūn*), Qur'ān 56:11–4), and so on, which it would become the task of exegesis to identify.[. . .]

In the case of the Qur'ān itself, the basic Islamic desideratum of *tawhīd* may be thought to be emphasised and acquire meaning in the context of the binary nature of consciousness ceaselessly and, one might say, musically invoked throughout that work.²⁷ Linguistically, the lexical parallel opposite of *tawhīd* or unity is *tashrīk*, but it was another verbal form that would come to stand for the notional opposite: *shirk*, 'assigning partners to God/violation of *tawhīd*'. It seems clear, in the context of the message of the Qur'ān, that the numerous references to *shirk* are meant as a foil to the all-important message of unity, and not the other way around, in the same way that references to divine wrath

²⁵ The following citation, including notes, is a lightly adapted from Lawson, "Duality," 29-31.

²⁶ On this term, see Teun van Dijk, *Some Aspects of Text Grammars* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).

²⁷ 'Work' may conjure, through the accident of etymology, the idea of Opera and raises the very interesting question about the operatic aspects of the Qur'ān, its recitation (performance) and audition (reception), its power to hold, transport and explain or at least contextualise the great mysteries and deep sufferings of life. A suggestive study that would certainly be of use in such an exploration is the recent work by Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera and the Art of Dying* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). The guiding insight is that audiences of opera are "[...] participating in a ritual of grieving or experiencing their own mortality by proxy [...] they can feel both identification and distance as they – safely – rehearse their own (or a loved one's) demise [...] death is made to feel logical or somehow right" (10–11).

are meant as a foil for divine mercy. Thus the otherwise purely theological topic of *tawhīd* may be brought into direct relation with the omnipresent *obligato*-type motif of duality and opposition that is heard and read “through” the Qur’ān.

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 Qur’ān. They appear to have something in common with similar pairs of opposites, near-opposites and other pairs of ethical moral religious values and qualities invoked in and found also throughout the Qur’ān: 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.²⁸

The late Norman O. Brown made the important remark that it does not matter where you open the Qur’ān, one can start reading it anywhere and find that one is ‘in the right place’²⁹ as it were:³⁰

“It does not matter in what order you read the Koran; it is all there all the time; and it is supposed to be there all the time in your mind or at the back of your mind, memorised and available for appropriate quotation and collage into your conversation or your writing or your action.”

The theme and/or ‘device’ – surely it is with this figure that structure and content are most perfectly melded – of opposites and duality in the Qur’ān helps account for the truth of Brown’s observation.³¹

²⁸ It is interesting to observe here the type of attributes that are never used to designate God, e.g. happy, gay, laughing, etc. See also the interesting observation in Schmidtke, “Pairs and Pairing,” EQ, on those pairs of divine names that are in fact not opposites, what she refers to as ‘double divine epithets’.

²⁹ This may be thought the literary equivalent or analogue of one of Nicholas of Cusa’s favorite philosophical and theological maxims: “God is a sphere whose center is everywhere.” Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa On Learned Ignorance: A Translation and Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 59. (See also 33). We know, though, that Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) got this image from his reading of Meister Eckhart (d. 1328). On the history of this metaphor see Karsten Harries, “The Infinite Sphere: Comments on the History of a Metaphor,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13, no.1 (1975): 5–15.

³⁰ The passage continues: “[...] hence the beautiful inconsequentiality of the arrangement of the Suras: from the longest to the shortest. In this respect the Koran is more avant-garde than *Finnegans Wake*, in which the over-all organization is entangled in both linear and cyclical patterns which it is trying to transcend.” Norman O. Brown, “The Apocalypse of Islam,” *Social Text* 8 (Winter, 1983–4): 166.

Among the many pairs of opposites used in this way throughout the Qur'ān, one is of particular interest for thinking about chaos and order in Islām: *islām* ≠ *jahl*. A brief examination of the semantic value of these two words will illustrate why it is perhaps not necessary for the Qur'ān to either posit or even contemplate primordial cosmogonic chaos in order to supply a foil or mate for its opposite. The interesting question, whether such an absence represents an inter-confessional apologetic, is enticing but will not be explored here.³² We will begin with the second term. *Jahl*, from the Arabic root *J-H-L*, means in the first instance “ignorance”. It is, according to the way in which the root and its derivations occur in the Qur'ān, an ignorance of far-ranging consequence and influence. In keeping with the “myth of symmetry,” so important to the Qur'ān and Islamic religiosity, later commentators and theorists divided historical time into two major periods: the period of ignorance, known as *al-Jāhiliyya* in the Qur'ān, and its polar opposite, *al-Islāmiyya*. The word is used to describe the condition most frequently exemplified by the Arabs of the Hijaz and environs prior to the revelation of Islām. It is in this context that the two terms, though one contains two syllables, may be thought to function as an ideational “minimal pair”. The root occurs twenty-four times. A related term, and one which is expressive of a strictly moral chaos and corruption of the type that obtained during the *jāhili* period, is represented by the Arabic word *fasād* which occurs no less than fifty times in some form or another in the Qur'ān. As observed by the author of the article on creation in the Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān: “The universe has been organized into a cosmos rather than a chaos and humanity is accordingly warned to introduce no human disorder into the divinely ordained arrangement of the physical world: Do not sow corruption (*lā tufsidū*) in the earth after its ordering (*ba'da islāhīhā*). (Qur'ān 7:56).”³³ In this instance, what might be thought the linguistic accident of rhyme and homophony obtaining between the words *islāh* (order, well-being) and *islām* is, in the context of the seamless vision of the Qur'ān, a most happy one. Thus *jahl* and *fasād*, as diametric opposites of *islām* shed light on the meaning of that word in the process of supplying a symmetrical counterweight to it.

It may be useful to reproduce here all of the twenty or so verses in which the word in some form or another actually appears in the Qur'ān. These verses will be arranged according to the grammatical form of the root in textual order³⁴, the first being the nominal *jāhiliyya*, which occurs four times.

³¹ Lawson, “Duality”.

³² Thomas Hoffman, “From the Chaotic to the Chaordic: Rethinking Chaos and Qur'an,” unpublished paper (typescript kindly provided by the author) presented at *The Qur'an: Text, History & Culture*, a conference convened by the Centre of Islamic Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 12-14 November 2009. See also Thomas Hoffman, “Koranisk/kaotisk: Om Koranens semantik, retorik, ritualisering, reception og konstruktion i lyset af begrebet 'kaos'”, *Chaos: Dansk-norsk tidsskrift for religionshistoriske studier*, (2009): 75-94 (unavailable to me).

³³ Daniel Carl Peterson, “Creation,” EQ, 474.

³⁴ We will leave to one side the very interesting “verse of the Trust”: “We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it; mankind undertook it — they have always been inept and foolish (*jahūl*).” *Sūrat al-aḥzab* (The Joint Forces) 33:72.

“After sorrow, He caused calm to descend upon you, a sleep that overtook some of you. Another group, caring only for themselves, entertained false thoughts about God, thoughts more appropriate to pagan ignorance (*jāhiliyya*), and said, ‘Do we get a say in any of this?’ [Prophet], tell them, ‘Everything to do with this affair is in God's hands.’ They conceal in their hearts things they will not reveal to you. They say, ‘If we had had our say in this, none of us would have been killed here.’ Tell them, ‘Even if you had resolved to stay at home, those who were destined to be killed would still have gone out to meet their deaths.’ God did this in order to test everything within you and in order to prove what is in your hearts. God knows your innermost thoughts very well.” *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* (The Family of Imran) 3:154

“Do they want judgment according to the time of pagan ignorance (*jāhiliyya*)? Is there any better judge than God for those of firm faith?” *Sūrat al-mā’ida* (The Feast) 5:50

“Stay at home, and do not flaunt your finery as they used to in the pagan past (*jāhiliyya*); keep up the prayer, give the prescribed alms, and obey God and His Messenger. God wishes to keep uncleanness away from you, people of the [Prophet's] House, and to purify you thoroughly.” *Sūrat al-aḥzāb* (The Joint Forces) 33:33

“While the disbelievers had fury in their hearts — the fury of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) — God sent His tranquility down on to His Messenger and the believers and made binding on them [their] promise to obey God for that was more appropriate and fitting for them. God has full knowledge of all things.” *Sūrat al-fatḥ* (The Triumph) 48:26

The second form of the root to be noticed here is *jahāla*. It also occurs four times in the Qur’ān:

“But God only undertakes to accept repentance from those who do evil out of ignorance (*bi-jahāla*) and soon afterwards repent: these are the ones God will forgive, He is all knowing, all wise.” *Sūrat al-nisā’* (The Women) 4:17

“When those who believe in Our revelations come to you [Prophet], say, ‘Peace be upon you. Your Lord has taken it on Himself to be merciful: if any of you has foolishly (*bi-jahāla*) done a bad deed, and afterwards repented and mended his ways, God is most forgiving and most merciful.’” *Sūrat al-an‘ām* (Livestock) 6:54

“But towards those who do wrong out of ignorance (*bi-jahāla*), and afterwards repent and make amends, your Lord is most forgiving and merciful.” *Sūrat al-naḥl* (The Bees) 16:119

“Believers, if a troublemaker brings you news, check it first, in case you wrong others unwittingly (*bi-jahāla*) and later regret what you have done.” *Sūrat al-ḥujurāt* (The Private Rooms) 49:6.

Thus the two forms are used to express, respectively, (1) a general period of ignorance, whose chief characteristic we eventually learn is the absence of strict monotheistic worship as revealed to Muḥammad and (2) specific cases of ignorance or foolishness which although they need not have the greater theological implications of the first usage, nonetheless enhance its meaning by elaborating a broader semantic field. By far, the most numerous occurrences of the root *J-H-L* is found in the fifteen verses in which

it appears in verbal or participial form. These related, various forms demonstrate and dramatize the meanings thus far encountered. We will list the verbal instances first:

“Even if We sent the angels down to them, and the dead spoke to them, and We gathered all things right in front of them, they still would not believe, unless God so willed, but of this most of them are ignorant (*yajhalūna*).” *Sūrat al-an‘ām* (Livestock) 6:111

“We took the Children of Israel across the sea, but when they came upon a people who worshipped idols, they said, ‘Moses, make a god for us like theirs.’ He said, ‘You really are foolish people (*tajhalūna*).” *Sūrat al-a‘rāf* (The Heights) 7:138

“My people, I ask no reward for it from you; my reward comes only from God. I will not drive away the faithful: they are sure to meet their Lord. I can see you are foolish (*tajhalūna*).” *Sūrat Hūd* (Hud) 11:29

“How can you lust after men instead of women? What fools you are (*bal antum qawm tajhalūna*)!” *Sūrat al-naml* (The Ants) 27:55

“He said, ‘Only God knows when it will come: I simply convey to you the message I am sent with but I can see you are an insolent people (*‘arākum qawman tajhalūna*).’” *Sūrat al-aḥqāf* (The Sand Dunes) 46:23

With the verbal form we acquire a new appreciation for the active dimension of *jahl*. It is something perpetrated. Even though it may seem to represent a passive or negative quality, such as ignorance or foolishness, it nonetheless requires a kind of existential or individual conscious decision to be ‘deployed’. It may be forgiven, as we saw above in verses 6:54 and 16:119. But repentance is necessary - an equally authentic conscious act, it would seem. The notion of individual choice in the matter of *jahl* is most clearly drawn in these following verses that use the active participle *jāhil*: “one who does *jahl*”. This can occur in singular or plural:

“Remember when Moses said to his people, ‘God commands you to sacrifice a cow.’ They said, ‘Are you making fun of us?’ He answered, ‘God forbid that I should be so ignorant (*min al-jāhilīn*).’” *Sūrat al-baqara* (The Cow) 2:67

“[Give] to those needy who are wholly occupied in God's way and cannot travel in the land [for trade]. The unknowing (*al-jāhil*) might think them rich because of their self-restraint, but you will recognize them by their characteristic of not begging persistently. God is well aware of any good you give.” *Sūrat al-baqara* (The Cow) 2:273

“If you find rejection by the disbelievers so hard to bear, then seek a tunnel into the ground or a ladder into the sky, if you can, and bring them a sign: God could bring them all to guidance if it were His will, so do not join the ignorant (*falā takūnanna mina al-jāhilīna*).” *Sūrat al-an‘ām* (Livestock) 6:35

“Be tolerant and command what is right: pay no attention to foolish people (*al-jāhilīna*).” *Sūrat al-a‘rāf* (The Heights) 7:199

“God said, ‘Noah, he was not one of your family. What he did was not right. Do not ask Me for things you know nothing about. I am warning you not to be foolish (*min al-jāhilīn*)’.” *Sūrat Hūd* (Hud) 11:46

“[Joseph] said, ‘My Lord! I would prefer prison to what these women are calling me to do. If You do not protect me from their treachery, I shall yield to them and do wrong (*wa’akun min al-jāhilīna*)’.” *Sūrat Yūsuf* (Joseph) 12:33

“He said, ‘Do you now realize what you did to Joseph and his brother when you were ignorant (*idh antum jāhilūna*)?’” *Sūrat Yūsuf* (Joseph) 12:89

“The servants of the Lord of Mercy are those who walk humbly on the earth, and who, when the foolish address them (*wa’idhha khāṭabahumu al-jāhilūna*), reply, ‘Peace’.” *Sūrat al-furqān* (The Differentiator) 25:63

“Whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away, saying, ‘We have our deeds and you have yours. Peace be with you! We do not seek the company of ignorant people (*lā nabtaghī al-jāhilīna*)’.” *Sūrat al-qasāṣ* (The Story) 28:55

“Say [O Muḥammad to the disbelievers], ‘Do you order me to worship someone other than God, you foolish people (*al-jāhilūna*)?’” *Sūrat al-zumar* (The Throngs) 39:64

Linguistic studies of this word *jahl* have made it clear that however much the term may be in some ways correctly considered a semantic opposite of the Arabic word for ‘knowledge’ or ‘knowing’ (viz, ‘ilm) its meaning in the context of the evolution of an Islamic semantic world-view is more to be found as a polar opposite of another, perhaps more revealing concept. As was demonstrated so clearly by Goldziher, who in the process of his explanation revised a millennium of thinking about the semantics of the term *jahl*, the proper opposite is not ‘knowledge’ or ‘knowing’ – but, precisely *ḥilm*,³⁵ a well-attested pre-Islamic concept and virtue described as “the moral reasonableness of a civilized man [. . .] thus *jahl* in the sources had the primary semantic function of referring to the implacable, reckless temper of the pagan Arabs.”³⁶ Building on this research, Izutsu, nearly fifty years ago, revised further the understanding of the term by demonstrating that the semantic field of *islām* as understood as designating the master ethos of the religion that goes by this name, is profoundly entwined with all of those virtues and moral qualities subsumed in the term *ḥilm*: forbearance, patience, generosity, compassion, slowness to anger, and humility. Izutsu further argued that in fact the word *islām* stands for a religious and moral ‘recital’ of all of those qualities understood by the word *ḥilm*.³⁷ As a result of this painstaking research by both Goldziher and Izutsu it becomes clear that in an Islamic context the opposite of the word *jahl* is precisely *islām*, as indicated in the above gloss on verses 25:63 and 28:55 where the linguistic crux of the problem is eloquently expressed. Thus, if *jahl* means

³⁵ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische studien*, vol. 1 (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1888), 319ff; Toshihiko Izutsu, “Chaper VIII,” in *God and Man in the Koran* (Tokyo: Keio University, 1964), 216-53; Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’ān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 28-36.

³⁶ Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 28.

³⁷ Izutsu, *God and Man*, ch. 8.

ignorance it is the opposite of the kind of ‘knowledge’ denoted by the Spanish notion of *educado* or the English notion of ‘cultivated’ and the Arabic notion of *adab*. To quote Izutsu:

“All things considered, it will be clear by now that in the semantic category of *jahl* there is comprised the central notion of a fierce, passionate nature which tends to get stirred up on the slightest provocation and which may drive a man to all sorts of recklessness; that this passion tends to manifest itself in a very peculiar way in the arrogant sense of honor characterizing the pagan Arabs, especially the Bedouin of the desert; and lastly that in the specifically Qur’ānic situation the word refers to the peculiar attitude of hostility and aggressiveness against the monotheistic belief of Islām, which was to the minds of most of Muḥammad’s contemporaries, too exacting ethically and which, moreover, called upon them to abandon their time-honored customs and their idols.”³⁸

In such a context, Islām then comes to stand for the opposite of barbarity, savagery, brutality and vainglory as well as standing for the opposite of ignorance and polytheism. ‘Submission’ thus becomes understood as obedience to an ethical norm which, if put in practice, will allow the greatest variety of human communities to live together peaceably. Such a vision has been associated with the famous “Constitution of Medina” in which numerous tribal and religious groups are identified and called upon to obey the law of Islām. In such a context, then, Islām may be seen as having raised the notion of civilization to the level of religious value. In the process, and as a result of the distinctive Islamic view of history and its profound relationship to prophecy, the prevailing “chaos of religions” obtaining at the time of the prophet Muḥammad, could, under the guidance of distinctively Islamic insights and teachings, be understood as equal partners in the spiritual and religious journey of humanity, *al-nās*. The mindless fate (*dahr*, cf. Qur’ān 45:24 & 76:1) of the pre-Islamic *jāhili* Arab is transformed under the pressure and immediacy of Muḥammad’s revelation into a seamless history of communities whose respective histories are determined by their obedience to or deviation from their own particular revelation. As the Qur’ān (16:36) says:

“We sent a messenger to every community, saying, ‘Worship God and shun false gods.’ Among them were some God guided; misguidance took hold of others. So travel through the earth and see what was the fate of those who denied the truth.” *Sūrat al-naḥl* (The Bees) 16:36

The Qur’ān insists that it teaches a divine and perennial wisdom. The 26 or 27 prophets it names in its pages and the 124,000 prophets recognized by Islamic tradition are all related as emissaries of a consistent, harmonious and supremely rational and ordered divine message. It is with such an extensive ‘alphabet of prophets’ that the language of the Qur’ānic ethos came to be spoken and understood over a heretofore unimaginably vast cultural and geographic range. Thus the Qur’ān demonstrates through the orchestration of an equally vast number of interlocking and mutually reinforcing

³⁸ Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 35. My sincere thanks to Prof. B. R. Lawson of Celaya for the Spanish suggestion.

symmetries a heretofore-undetected sacred and luminous order of enlightenment and plan.

At the deeper levels, each symmetry is connected to all others by virtue of its symmetry. Taking as the central and defining metaphor of Islamic religious orientation the notion of *tawhīd*, it may be argued that far from being a mere abstract ‘theological’ idea, it is – perhaps in addition to this – a metaphor or emblem of a social transformation which took place in the wake of Muḥammad’s powerful religious experience, the revelation, for which one cognate is the word apocalypse, the evidence for which is known as the Qur’ān. Thus each key term of the Qur’ānic *Weltanschauung* is determined and understood by an opposite or companion term.³⁹ So, *tawhīd* ‘affirming or making one[ness]’ is contextualized by its conceptual opposite, the unforgivable sin in Islam, *shirk* ‘violating divine oneness’.⁴⁰ It is perhaps for this reason that the asymmetrical final respective verbal forms of these two central concepts have acquired their permanence in the discourse.

A chaos of Religions

The Qur’ān may be slyly speaking of itself, when in Sura 12, the remarkable *Sūrat Yūsuf* (Joseph), Pharaoh’s benighted advisors dismiss the sequence of images that came to the royal sleeper as “jumbled dreams” (*aḍghāth aḥlam*, verse 44). These are the same dreams that will soon be interpreted by the young, imprisoned prophet Yūsuf and thereby achieve the status of divine revelation. Moreover, it is the public act of properly reading and interpreting these Pharaonic dreams that wins Yūsuf his release from prison and elevates him to a powerful royal position. In short, Yūsuf’s reading of the dreams causes his heretofore secret status as prophet to be revealed along with the true meaning of the heretofore coded or ‘jumbled’ message of Pharaoh’s dream. Meaning emerges from apparent chaos and meaninglessness. This is a key feature of the Qur’ānic apocalypse: revelation occurs through interpretation. In the first place, and perhaps the most obvious, this interpretation occurs when the Qur’ān understands all previous religious history as leading to its own vision. From one – somewhat cynical point of view, this is the all-too-familiar ‘imperial device’ known in countless contexts and periods of human experience. From another angle it solves the problem of the ‘chaos of religions’ confronting both Muḥammad and his community, transforming this disorder into order through narrative and interpretation. Thus both intellectual or spiritual and social chaos are the atemporal terminus post quem of the Islamic *Weltanschauung* as this is encoded in the Qur’ān text. There is no cosmogonic or ontological equivalent. This is perhaps unsurprising and ‘as it should be’ in a religion for which the primary spiritual-cum theological value is oneness and its affirmation.

Islam does not teach an original sin, there is nonetheless a Fall. The distinctive Islamic Fall is understood not as the result of sin as such but the result of forgetting the original covenant mentioned above. Indeed, in order to make this point some commentators, beginning with the so-called ‘father of exegesis’, Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687)

³⁹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*.

⁴⁰ “God does not forgive the joining of partners with Him (*an yushraka bihī*): anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who joins partners with God has concocted a tremendous sin.” *Sūrat al-mā’ida* (The Feast) 4:48.

have derived the word for humanity, *al-nās* not from its etymologically sound root *uns* ('conviviality') but from *nasiya* 'forgetfulness'.⁴¹ And just as Islām acknowledges a Fall without original sin, there seems also to be a Creation without previous chaos. The chaos that lurks in Islām is actually always a threat, even though historically the *jāhiliyya* period is given a specific date. This periodization would seem to be more for convenient reference to remind the believer of the true character of *jahl* so that it may be recognized and countered whenever it is present.

"[J]āhiliyah was conceived by Muḥammad and his companions not as a period of time that had now passed away, but rather as something dynamic, a certain psychological state apparently driven away by the new force of Islām, but surviving secretly in the minds of the believers, ready to break in at any moment upon their consciousness; and that this was felt by the Prophet to be a standing menace to the new religion."⁴²

Islām thus means, in addition to 'submission', order, self-discipline and enlightenment in the context of its own space-time continuum where it sees itself as ringed round by chaos, temporally (the historic *jāhiliyya*), spatially (the medieval *dār al-Islām*), and existentially (*jāhiliyya* as a constant inward pressure). Islām as such emerges as a refuge of order and meaning, precisely a *dār al-hijra*. In this refuge, symmetry and morality reflect the oneness (source of symmetry) of God and in the community, the *umma*, social and political justice and equity, (of the type delineated, for example, in the Constitution of Medina) also reflect divine oneness. Thus it emerges that another possible synonym for *jahl* is the unforgivable sin mentioned above, *shirk* 'polytheism'. As the opposite of *islām* and *tawḥīd* there can be no doubt that these two key words of the Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung* bespeak a chaos that is exponentially more dangerous and threatening than the cosmogonic void of *tohubohu*; dangerous because it threatens to break through at all times and, it would seem, is not the sole responsibility of the merciful God who speaks through the Qur'ān. Perhaps the single most eloquent argument or statement against chaos, nihilism, meaninglessness, vanity and emptiness (for which a frequent Qur'ānic term is *bāṭil* - the diametric opposite of the Qur'ānic term for truth or reality in the highest possible degree, *al-ḥaqq*⁴³) is the theory of signs found in those several verses thought of as elaborating and constituting a distinctive Qur'ānic theme. The most frequently quoted is the one in which it is made clear in no uncertain terms that human consciousness is "imprisoned" in a cosmos of meaning from which there can be no escape. The key term here, *āya*, sing. (*āy/āyāt*, pl.), is also the distinctive term by which a Qur'ānic verse is known (verses of 'mere' poetry are called *bayt/abyāt*). It is equivalent to the Hebrew *oth*, and the Aramaic and Syriac *āthā*. In the Qur'ān and Islamic usage it should be further nuanced as 'miraculous sign', 'portent', or perhaps even 'meaning event'.⁴⁴ As such, the term may have something in

⁴¹ R. Arnaldez, "Insān," *EI*².

⁴² Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 29.

⁴³ *Bāṭil* occurs 31 times in some form or another; *al-ḥaqq* occurs 227 times. They are presented as diametric opposites in 2:42; 3:71; 8:8; 13:17; 17:81; 18:52; 21:18; 22:62; 31:30; 34:49; 40:5; 40:78 (verbal); 42:24.

⁴⁴ A. Jeffery, "Āya," *EI*². See, for example, Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: a Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

common with the *sēmeia* of the Gospel of John.⁴⁵ In any case, it has provided countless generations of Muslim intellectuals with guidance, confirmation and inspiration in their attempts to reconcile the twin sources of knowledge recognized by their tradition: revelation and reason. The verse runs as follows:

“We shall show them Our signs in every region of the earth and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth.” *Sūrat fuṣṣilat* (Expounded) 41:53

Thus the entire creation is a cosmos of order, beauty and, most importantly meaning. Each created thing (and all ‘things’ – *ashyā* – are by definition created) is a ‘sign’, a meaning event. Such signs appear in every region (*fī l-afāq*, lit: ‘in the horizons’, ‘in the external realm’, ‘in the macrocosm’) and in the souls of human beings: “in themselves” (*fī anfusihim*, lit: “in their souls”, ‘in the interior realm’, ‘in the microcosm’). All of these multifarious loci of meaning are to be understood by the aid of those literary ‘signs’ of the Qur’ān, the divine verses themselves. According to the Qur’ān, it was not a cosmogonic creation of a perfect world out of primordial chaos that is responsible for such order, rather it is the birth of consciousness identified with the Day of the Covenant mentioned above. The difference between *jahl* and *islām*, savagery and civilization, chaos and order is determined by the ability to read aright the signs of Allāh wherever they may be encountered, and they are encountered everywhere.

Is this an apocalyptic vision? Recent scholarship has advanced the study of apocalypse by refining a definition of the genre. Such refined definitions are based upon the identification of several motives and categories frequently found in such texts. Of the several literary and religious textual features thus isolated and characterized it is important to note that many, if not all, occur in the Qur’ān. Such an insight has implications for the study of comparative scripture. This research could help to refine our thinking about the relationship between the Qur’ān and an apocalyptic cultural and literary landscape out of which it may have arisen. These striking literary qualities are what seem to set the Qur’ān text apart from other scriptures. Simultaneously, they also provide evidence for the ebbing of an apocalyptic imagination. Such a study helps us approach the question, using terminology from other traditions, of how in Islam heresy became orthodoxy. The apocalyptic themes so prominent in the Qur’ān are eventually pressed into the service of dividing the world into two mutually exclusive domains: the so-called *dār al-islām*, ‘the abode of islām’ and the *dār al-ḥarb*, ‘the abode of strife’. It is difficult not to associate these two categories with the parallel notions of cosmos and chaos.

⁴⁵ A useful source for such a comparison would be Willis Hedley Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia in the Gospel of John* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).